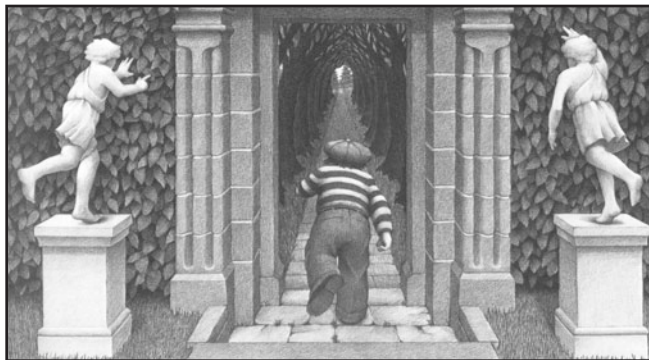


THE GARDEN OF ABDUL GASAZI

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Book Summary

When young Alan Mitz is asked to take care of Miss Hester's unruly dog Fritz while she visits cousin Eunice, he has no idea what adventures are in store for him. Fritz keeps Alan busy all morning by attempting to chew up Miss Hester's furniture. When the two both settle in for a nap, Alan makes sure to hide his hat from Fritz, who is known to love chewing hats above even furniture!

Later, Alan dutifully takes Fritz for his afternoon walk. Fritz leads the way across a little white bridge. Alan stops on the other side to read a sign that declares, "ABSOLUTELY, POSITIVELY NO DOGS ALLOWED IN THIS GARDEN," signed by the mysterious Abdul Gasazi, retired magician. Just as Alan turns to leave, Fritz breaks free and runs past the sign and through the door to Gasazi's garden. Alan chases Fritz deep into the garden. Slipping and falling, he loses sight of the little dog and must follow his prints along a path leading into a forest. Finally, Alan comes to a clearing and sees the massive home of Abdul Gasazi. Believing that the magician has captured Fritz, Alan bravely knocks on the door and is welcomed into Gasazi's home by the great man himself.

After apologizing and explaining his predicament to the magician, Alan asks for Fritz to be returned. Gasazi asks Alan to follow him outside, where they come upon a group of ducks. Expressing his dislike of dogs, the magician tells poor Alan that he has turned Fritz into one of the ducks. As Alan tearfully takes the duck that is Fritz into his arms and heads for home, a gust of wind blows his hat off of his head. The duck swoops up, catches it, and flies away into the distance. A miserable Alan walks back to Miss Hester's house only to learn from Miss Hester that Fritz was in fact waiting in the front yard when she returned from Eunice's. She tells Alan that the magician has simply played a trick on him. Relieved, Alan says goodbye and heads for home. After he leaves, Fritz trots up to Miss Hester with Alan's lost hat in his mouth! Was Gasazi playing a joke, or was Fritz *really* temporarily turned into a duck?!

Special Features

Chris Van Allsburg began his career as an author and illustrator of children's books in full stride with his first book, *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*. From the very beginning of his writing life, Van Allsburg has been beguiling readers with stories that balance on the edge of fantasy and reality. Was Fritz really turned into a duck, or did he find Alan's hat by coincidence? We readers are allowed to decide for ourselves—although we are subtly encouraged to challenge the idea that we are never too old to believe in magic. "He was too old

to believe in magic," Van Allsburg writes of Alan as he walks home, feeling foolish about being "tricked" by Gasazi. But when Fritz drops Alan's hat at Miss Hester's feet, we are forced to reevaluate our ideas about what has happened. This is an important idea to teach young readers: we must always be on our toes, always asking ourselves to think through what is really going on in stories we read. The story also provides an interesting background for a discussion with children about responsibility. Throughout the book, Alan behaves utterly responsibly—doing his best to take care of Fritz and honestly approaching the frightening magician about what has happened.

Readers will be struck both by Van Allsburg's command of language and his ability to tell a story clearly and cleanly, yet with vivid description, and by the exquisite pencil drawings for which he is now well known. Each character is imbued with unique personality, and each scene is rendered to portray a specific mood—the eeriness of Gasazi's garden, the still gloominess of the magician's sitting room, the warmth of Miss Hester's house when Alan arrives to find that Fritz has already come home.

Van Allsburg does a wonderful job describing the character of Fritz the dog, whose mischief adds a great deal to the story. While Fritz is not what one might call a well-behaved dog, we fall in love with his "dogginess" as Van Allsburg describes how he loves to "chew on the chairs and shake the stuffing out of the pillows." His little nose poking out from below the sofa as he and Alan settle in for a nap endears us. While we are concerned for Alan when Fritz runs away into the magician's garden, we can't help but smile as we read how Fritz "barked with laughter as he galloped out of sight." It is difficult to describe the personality of a character that doesn't speak a word—but Van Allsburg has rendered Fritz into a distinct and very believable "doggy" character. He is so appealing that it is no surprise that Van Allsburg has chosen to hide this impish dog in each of the many children's books he has written since his debut with *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*.



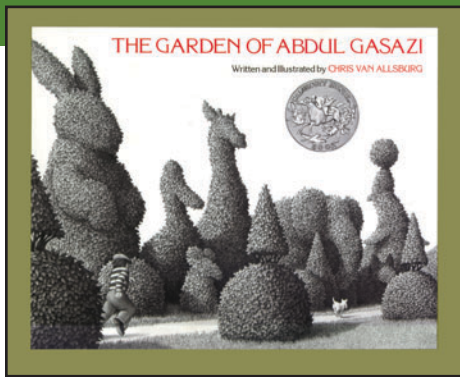
Summary of Teaching Ideas

From the beginning of his career as a children's book author, Van Allsburg has been challenging readers to imagine a world in which everything may not be exactly as it seems. Mystery intrudes often into what we think of as "real life." It may be interesting to tackle this idea during a reading workshop with some of your experienced upper-grade readers. You might examine together how it is that Van Allsburg creates such mystery in his work. One strategy he uses is to thoroughly create a believable "normal" world, both with his illustrations and with his writing. When something strange begins to happen—such as Fritz being turned into a duck—he describes the event in the same detailed way. We readers begin to easily believe in situations and ideas that might seem far-fetched if Van Allsburg didn't so carefully and matter-of-factly describe them. Do your students know other books, either by Van Allsburg or other writers, that work in the same way?

Another wonderful teaching point that can be made using *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* is that readers might not always interpret the same text in the same way. Some children may wholeheartedly believe that Fritz was indeed turned into a duck by the magician. Some may believe just as strongly that it was only a joke, and that the appearance of Alan's hat in Fritz's mouth was sheer coincidence. You will want to teach your students the importance of finding evidence in the text that they can use to back up their theories. For example, a child who believes it was a trick might think that the duck simply happened to drop the hat as he flew, and Fritz happened to find it when he was running home on his own. Fritz could have picked the hat up from Miss Hester's yard, as well, since before he brings it to Miss Hester, he is "playfully running around the front yard."

Children will be interested in discussing (and perhaps trying out in their own writing) the ways in which Van Allsburg creates Fritz's personality without having him speak. What other methods can we use to describe a character besides dialogue? A detailed lesson plan for an investigation into creating believable non-speaking characters appears below.

Of course, it is always important to spend time discussing the "big ideas" of the text with your students. What deeper meaning was Van Allsburg expressing when he wrote this book? One interesting issue to think about is that of young Alan's sense of responsibility. Throughout the story, Alan does his best to keep Fritz out of trouble. Through no fault of his own, he doesn't completely succeed. Children may be interested in discussing situations in their own lives in which they have been responsible for taking care of something—either a pet or a task—and have had some sort of trouble. Exploring Alan's feelings may give them an opportunity to explore their own. Another, larger idea in the text is belief in magic, a theme that is echoed in many of Van Allsburg's more recent books as well. Children tend to believe more easily than adults in things for which they have no concrete proof. Alan easily believed that Fritz was a duck until Miss Hester told him the magician was only fooling. Why do adults tend to lose their openness to "magic"? These questions can provide for interesting class discussions.



Guiding Questions for *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* Read-Aloud

- Why do you think Fritz breaks free of the leash to go into Gasazi's garden? Do you think he knows what he is doing?
- Why do you think Van Allsburg writes that Fritz "barked with laughter" as he ran away from Alan? Is he being mean spirited or just playful? How do you think Alan is feeling at that moment?

- When Alan tells Gasazi about his problem, stop before Gasazi answers and ask the children to predict whether or not they think he will help Alan get Fritz back. Then ask them what in the book makes you think that?
- Do you think Gasazi really turned Fritz into a duck, or was he, as Miss Hester said, playing a trick on Alan? What in the book makes you think that?

Describing Characters without Dialogue

An upper-grade writing lesson

What You'll Need:

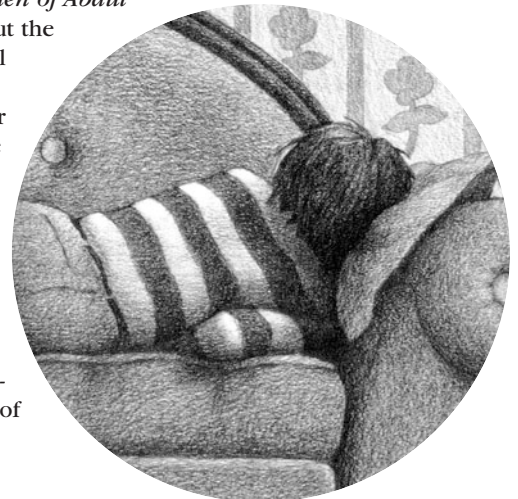
- A copy of *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*
- Writing paper and pencils for the students
- Chart paper or an overhead projector

Background Knowledge:

This lesson fits well within the context of a writing workshop in which children write each day about topics of their own choosing. However, it can be easily presented as an independent writing project as well. It will be helpful if children are familiar with the elements of a story and have had some experience writing narratives of their own. You may want to read the book to the children on a separate occasion to familiarize them with the story.

Introduction:

As your students gather around you in a central meeting area, tell them that they will be examining the way Chris Van Allsburg helps the character of Fritz come to life in the book *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*—all without the use of dialogue. Tell them you will be examining together how writers create living, breathing characters by describing their actions. Students will be creating their own characters and describing them thoroughly without the use of



dialogue. This is an easier and more logical process to undertake when describing an animal character—something that is quite common in the stories of youngsters, whether they are writing fiction or personal narrative—but it can be done with a human character as well, if necessary.

Teaching:

Examine with your students how Van Allsburg creates a distinct character for Fritz the dog without Fritz uttering a word. You may want to start by eliciting observations from your students; they are likely to notice a great deal if they are already familiar with the story.

First you will want to make a list together, either on the overhead projector or on chart paper, of Fritz's qualities. Students may be likely to say things like "He bites," "He is mischievous," "He has his own mind," "He doesn't listen well." If they don't notice such things, you will want to point them in the right direction.

Next, you will want to examine how Van Allsburg gives readers this information about Fritz—who is, after all, a dog. Make another list describing what Van Allsburg does to teach us about Fritz's character without using words. You may need to provide students with support here and steer the conversation in the right direction. You will hope for students to notice that Van Allsburg describes *how other people react* to Fritz—cousin Eunice's letter to Miss Hester, for example, says, "P.S., Please leave your dog home." You will hope that they notice that Van Allsburg describes *how Fritz behaves*—"He loved to chew on the chairs and shake the stuffing out of the pillows." They may notice that Van Allsburg gives Fritz some *human-like characteristics*—"Fritz barked with laughter as he galloped out of sight."

Tell your students that when they are describing either animal characters or characters who don't speak, they can learn from Van Allsburg and describe how others react to their characters and how their characters behave, and (if their characters are animals) they can give them human-like characteristics, as Van Allsburg does with Fritz.

Writing Time:

As your students go off to write individually, ask them to spend their writing time describing a character who does not speak. Tell them you will be checking to see if they are trying out any of the techniques Van Allsburg uses to describe Fritz in *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*.

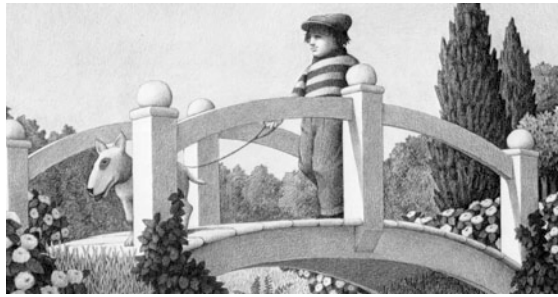
As your students work, confer with them individually about their character descriptions.

Share:

Share the work of one or two students who have described characters using some of Van Allsburg's techniques. Discuss with the class how these students have brought their characters to life, even without words.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Writers:

- Have students write stories about special animals in their lives.
- Have students write Fritz's continuing adventures.



Expanding This Lesson:

- Expand the lesson to include dialogue. All of the techniques Van Allsburg uses to describe Fritz can also be used when describing any character. Make a chart of important things to keep in mind when writing character descriptions. Have students write character descriptions for all

characters in the stories they are working on.

- Have students write a complete story to go with the character they described in the original lesson.

Readers Don't Always Agree

A lower-grade read-aloud lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*
- Chart paper labeled "Readers Don't Always Agree"

Background Knowledge:

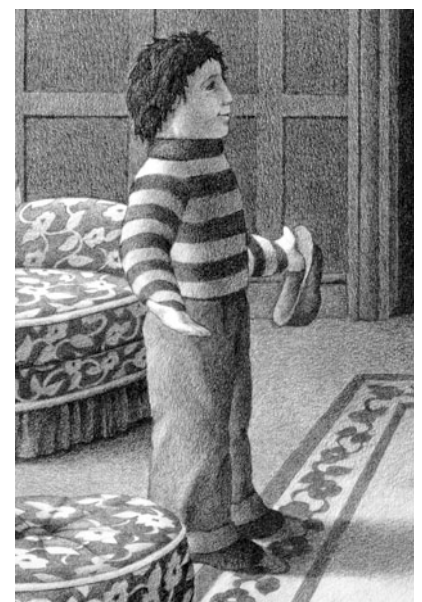
This lesson is focused around conversation that is developed during a read-aloud of the book *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*. The lesson should be equally successful whether your students have been exposed to the book before or not. It is helpful if your class is comfortable having whole-class discussions about books and if you have set up some ground rules about sharing ideas—for example, "one person speaks at a time." It is sometimes helpful to have kids call on one another, instead of always choosing who speaks yourself—this gives children a sense of ownership of the conversation and may help them to feel more invested in it.

Introduction:

Tell your students that you will be reading Chris Van Allsburg's book *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* to them, and that then the class will be discussing some of the big ideas in the book. "There may be things about which you don't all agree," you may tell them, "and that's all right. In fact, it's great when readers have different opinions when discussing books because it makes our conversations more interesting!"

Teaching:

Read the story to your students, who are gathered around you in your class's meeting area, sitting next to their reading partners. You may want to pause every so often to ask a quick comprehension question before you get into the main discussion at the end of the story. For example, you may stop and ask, "How do you think Alan feels when Fritz breaks free of the leash? How would you feel?" and



then ask your students to turn to their reading partners and talk about what they think. Let them discuss for two or three minutes before you come back together as a class and share a few ideas. This gives each child a chance to share his or her thinking out loud and encourages quieter children to feel more comfortable doing so. You may want to have your students “turn and talk” two times before getting to the main discussion. Tell them that it’s all right if they don’t agree with each other, because having different opinions makes reading even more interesting.

Discussion Time:

After you have finished reading the story, tell the students that you have something very important to discuss together. Ask them to think about whether or not they believe Fritz was really turned into a duck by the magician. Their responses will depend on your individual students, but in general some children will probably think yes and some children will probably think no. Ask them to share their thinking about this with the whole class, using evidence from the book to back up their opinions. Tell them that there is no one right answer—Mr. Van Allsburg has left it up to each reader to make his or her own decision. It is important for readers to be able to form strong opinions based on evidence from the book, and to be able to articulate those opinions out loud. You may need to help your children disagree without feeling upset—it can be hard for young children to understand that they can have differing opinions without one person being all right and one person being all wrong. You may want to make a chart to record what they say, with one side listing evidence for Fritz having been turned into a duck and the other side listing evidence for the magician having played a trick on Alan. You can label the chart “Readers Don’t Always Agree” and keep it posted in your room to refer to during other book discussions.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Readers:

Ask your students to carry this lesson’s guiding point (readers don’t always agree) into discussions they have with their partners during independent reading time. Ask them to notice the times they don’t agree with each other. Tell them that it is important to back up their opinions with evidence from their books, but that they may agree to disagree.

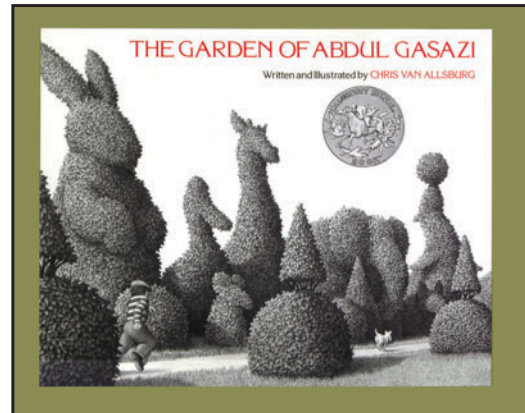
Expanding This Lesson:

- Continue this type of discussion during other times when you read aloud to your students.
- Focus on strategies for expressing opinions that are kind. Instead of “You’re wrong!” they can say, “I disagree, and here’s why.” You may want to create a list of nice ways students can speak to one another when they don’t agree in discussions—elicit these ideas from your students.

Just for Fun

- Imagine that Alan goes back to talk to Mr. Gasazi about the incident. How will the magician react? Will they become friends? Describe their continuing adventures in writing.
- Imagine that Fritz didn’t come back to Miss Hester’s house—what would Alan have done? Or imagine that Fritz did come back but he remained a duck—how would Alan have explained that to Miss Hester?!

- What if a magician lived down the street from you in your neighborhood? Would your magician be a kind or a grouchy character? What kind of powers might your magician have? Write about what might happen if you were to visit this person.

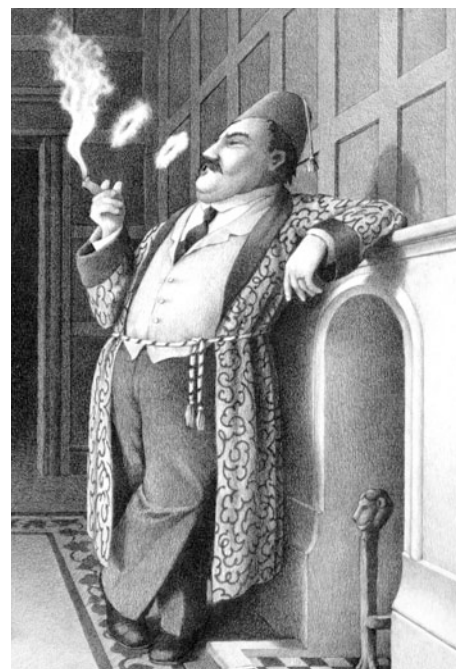


The Garden of Abdul Gasazi 25th year anniversary!

Caldecott Honor Book (1980)
New York Times Best Illustrated Book of the Year
Horn Book Award
ALA Notable Book for Children
Reading Rainbow Review Book

First book by Chris Van Allsburg

“This is without question one of the best and most original picture books in years.”—*New York Times Book Review*



JUMANJI

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Plot Summary

When Peter and Judy's parents head to the opera and leave the children to their own devices for the afternoon, the children's excitement quickly turns to boredom. This changes when they find what appears to be an ordinary board game labeled "Jumanji" sitting under a tree in the park. A note taped to the box warns them to read the instructions. Mildly curious, the children take the game home. When they halfheartedly begin to play, it becomes immediately apparent that they are dealing with a very unusual game!

With each roll of the dice, the events described by the game board begin to materialize around them. As the game progresses, their quiet home is transformed by a hungry lion, a band of mischievous monkeys, a befuddled guide, a monsoon, a rhinoceros stampede, and a giant python draped across the mantelpiece. Just as the children begin to lose hope that their home will ever be quiet again, Judy wins the game by landing on the square representing the golden city of Jumanji. In an instant, the house is exactly as it was before they began playing. Peter and Judy run back to the park, deposit the game under the tree where they found it, and are fast asleep when their parents return. Later that evening, they look out the window and see Danny and Walter Budwing, two children not known for reading instructions, carrying the box out of the park toward their home.

Special Features

Jumanji is a beloved classic. Van Allsburg's black-and-white pencil drawings create a richly textured world where bizarre clashes of context are made starkly apparent. The comfort and order of Judy and Peter's home is shockingly rearranged by the intrusion of the world of Jumanji. Children will delight in the appearance of hungry monkeys on the kitchen table and charging rhinos wrapped in the telephone cord. The pictures and the text work together to explore the boundary between fantasy and reality—creative territory in which Chris Van Allsburg is a clear master.

Children of all ages will be drawn immediately to the expressive drawings. Younger children can be invited to think and talk about the characters' changing emotions through a careful examination of the pictures. Older children may be interested in going deeper and discussing the pictorial composition—sometimes as readers we seem to hover in the air slightly above the action, sometimes we are placed down at kid level in the room with the characters. How are the pictures framed? What does Van Allsburg choose to include and not to include? These questions can be asked about

both the artwork and the text.

Jumanji provides teachers and students with many craft techniques to explore. Van Allsburg describes action in clear, concise, straightforward language that easily carries readers along. The following excerpt demonstrates his use of strong, descriptive verbs (*squeeze, scrambled, slammed*):

The lion roared so loud it knocked Peter right off his chair. The big cat jumped to the floor. Peter was up on his feet, running through the house with the lion a whisker's length behind. He ran upstairs and dove under a bed. The lion tried to squeeze under, but got his head stuck. Peter scrambled out, ran from the bedroom, and slammed the door behind him.

The use of dialogue in *Jumanji* also works to move the plot along. Younger children can be invited to simply notice the dialogue. Teachers might ask, "How do we know that someone is talking?" Children who are more experienced readers and writers will benefit from studying not only Van Allsburg's use of punctuation when writing dialogue, but how he brings his characters alive with realistic and exciting conversation. For example:

"I don't think," said Peter in between gasps of air, "that I want... to play... this game... anymore."

The book introduces rich themes to be explored during either a community book conversation with the entire class or children's independent or partner reading work. Children can be asked to think about the "big ideas" in the book (for example, always read the instructions, finish what you start, persevere in the face of adversity, and enjoy a simple life) and to collect text evidence for their theories.

Find Fritz:

In *Jumanji*, Fritz the dog is a pull toy on the floor in the living room where the children begin playing the game.



Teaching Ideas

Whether in the context of an author study of Chris Van Allsburg or studied on its own, *Jumanji* is full of teachable ideas for students of all ages. Both the pictures and the text are packed with details that invite the reader into the world of the story. Even young children can be asked to notice these details and discuss them—for example, Peter and Judy's home comes to life because of Van Allsburg's attention to detail in the drawings. He draws Peter's and Judy's toys scattered across the carpet and even includes their father's pipe resting on the mantel. The specificity of everyday life makes the intrusion of wild animals even more surprising. The text achieves an equally vivid effect with its use of sensory detail; for example, "Peter and Judy covered their ears as the sound of splintering wood and breaking china filled the house."

Because dialogue is a strong element of the text, more experienced writers can be asked to study both the punctuation of dialogue and the way Van Allsburg brings Peter and Judy to life by writing believable conversation. As a writing lesson, children can be asked to try out adding believable dialogue to their own stories. Or children can be encouraged to develop their reading fluency by reading the dialogue out loud with expression.

Van Allsburg moves the plot forward gracefully and thrillingly with his clear and vivid descriptions of action, which include the use of exciting, precise verbs. Instead of *shutting* the door, Peter *slams* it. Instead of *running* through the living room, the rhinos *charge*. The author's thoughtful choice of verbs provides a wonderful example for children who are working on describing action in their own stories.

Guiding Questions for a *Jumanji* Read-Aloud

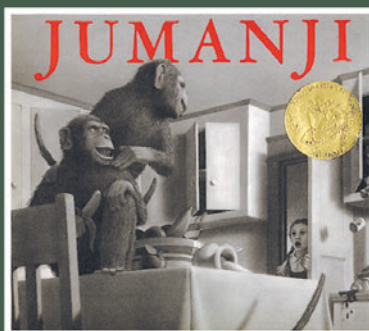
- Have you ever played a game or put something together without reading the instructions? What happened?
- What do you do when you are bored the way Peter and Judy were before they found the game? How do you find imaginative ways to amuse yourself?
- What might have happened to Peter and Judy if they had not read the instructions to *Jumanji*? What might happen to the Budwing boys?
- How do Peter and Judy change as a result of their adventure with *Jumanji*? What have they learned?

Strong Verbs for Writing Action

An upper-grade writing lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Jumanji*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector with a T-chart entitled "Be Specific: Using Strong Verbs." Label one side "strong verbs" and the other "boring verbs."
- Markers/overhead pens
- Writing paper and pencils for the students



Background Knowledge:

It will be helpful if your students are already familiar with the story of *Jumanji*. That way, they can focus on specific aspects of the text while understanding the story as a whole. Your class should have a basic understanding of how different parts of speech function in a sentence, particularly verbs. The teaching point focuses on verb *choice* rather than verb function. The lesson is designed to be used within the context of an ongoing writing workshop, but can be presented outside of that context as well.

Introduction:

As your children are gathered around you in a central meeting place, tell them that they are going to be studying one of the ways that Chris Van Allsburg makes *Jumanji* such an engaging story. Tell them directly that one way in which writers create excitement in their stories is to use strong and interesting verbs. Chris Van Allsburg uses strong verbs when describing the action that takes place in *Jumanji*, which draws readers in. Tell the students that they will be studying how he does this and then trying it out in their own writing.

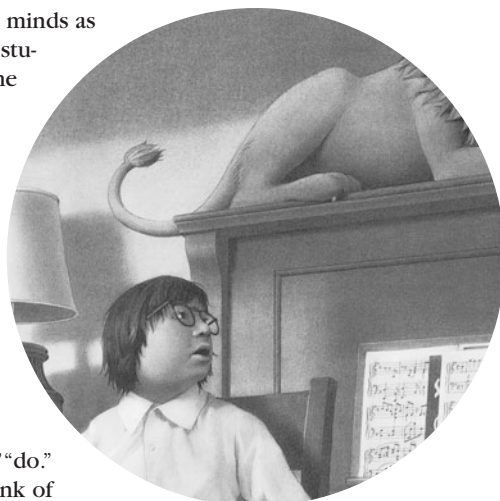
Teaching:

Ask your students to recall the part in the book in which Peter is chased by the lion. Read the section aloud, asking your students to pay attention to the verbs Van Allsburg uses.

Peter was up on his feet, running through the house with the lion a whisker's length behind. He ran upstairs and dove under a bed. The lion tried to squeeze under, but got his head stuck. Peter scrambled out, ran from the bedroom, and slammed the door behind him. He stood in the hall with Judy, gasping for breath.

Ask the children to tell you what strong verbs they heard. They will probably notice verbs like "dove," "squeeze," "scrambled," "slammed," "gasping." If they don't, support their noticing by drawing their attention to certain verbs. Collect the strong verbs they have noticed on the "strong verbs" side of your chart. Point out that Van Allsburg chose those verbs for a reason. He could have used "went" instead of "dove" to describe how Peter got under the bed, but "dove" puts a clearer and more vivid picture in our minds as we read. With your students' help, write the boring equivalent for each strong verb on your chart.

Now ask your students to think of some boring verbs. Add two or three of them to your chart. The students may suggest verbs like "go," "say," "do." Now have them think of some strong verbs that give a more specific picture to the reader. Each child may come up with different "exciting" verbs for each of the "boring" verbs they started



with. This will provide you with a good opportunity to discuss how nonspecific the boring verbs are and how important it is to write with precision and clarity.

Tell your students that in their writing lesson that day, they should go back to a piece they wrote earlier and circle several verbs that are not specific. Ask them to replace these with strong verbs that describe the action in a more specific way.

Writing Time:

As your students write, confer with them about the process of discerning differences in verbs. Some students may need help simply identifying verbs in the sentence and some may need help thinking of more specific verbs.

If your students are not involved in an ongoing writing workshop in which they are writing each day about topics of their own choosing, this work can be done in the context of any writing piece the children have been working on. Simply pass out some of their earlier writing and ask them to revise it by changing boring verbs into strong ones.

Share:

Share the work of a student who has effectively identified a nonspecific verb and changed it into a strong and specific verb. Discuss with the class how much clearer and more vivid the description of action is when this is done.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Writers:

- Turn this idea into a lesson on simply identifying verbs. It will be helpful if children have already been exposed to the idea of verbs in some other context.
- Write a group story with your students. You be the scribe. Encourage them to choose strong verbs in the context of this story.

Expanding This Lesson:

Start a list of strong verbs to be displayed in your classroom as reminders to your students when they are writing about action. Ask the students to change the exciting verbs in *Jumanji* to boring ones. Then examine how different the story is, and how much less exciting.

What Is the Big Idea?

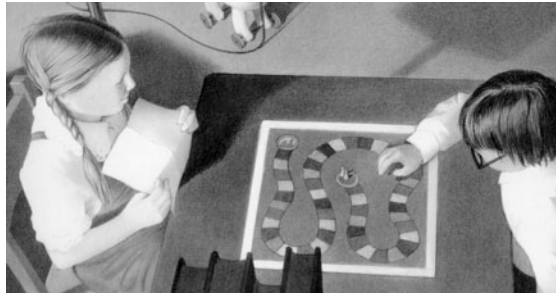
A lower-grade reading lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Jumanji*
- Chart paper and markers

Background Knowledge:

It will be helpful to your students if they are already familiar with the story of *Jumanji* so that they can easily focus on your teaching point. This lesson works as an introduction to the idea of finding larger ideas, lessons, or messages in what we read. If you have already introduced this idea to your class, the lesson can serve as a helpful follow-up. Students should already be relatively comfortable with retelling the important events in a story.



Introduction:

Tell the children that writers usually include a lesson or a message in their stories that goes beyond what the words actually say, and that our job as readers is to pay attention to the meaning of the whole story to determine what this message, or “big idea,” might be. Tell them that in *Jumanji*, Chris Van Allsburg does more than just tell the story of Peter and Judy and

the game; he teaches us a lesson about how to be in the world. All good books have big ideas in them. Tell the students that today you will be retelling *Jumanji*, then talking about what some possible big ideas might be, and then they will try doing the same thing in their independent reading books.

Teaching:

Together as a class, retell the story of *Jumanji*. You may want to reread the entire book so that the story is fresh in your students' minds. You may choose to create a quick timeline on chart paper for your students to refer to. Ask them to turn and talk to someone near them about what they think some of the big ideas are. What is Chris Van Allsburg trying to teach us? Share some of these ideas as a community and record them on chart paper.

You may find that some children simply retell the events of the story without thinking about the deeper meaning. These students will need more support from you as they think—you may want to prepare some guiding questions for this conversation. For example, “Did Peter and Judy learn anything from their experience? What did they learn? What in the book makes you think that? What do we readers learn from Peter and Judy's mistakes?” Create a list on chart paper of some of the big ideas your students collect. They may come up with ideas like “it is important to read the instructions thoroughly before starting something,” or “keep going even when things get tough.” Before you send your students off to read on their own, ask them to think about finding the big ideas in their own books. You may want to ask them to record their ideas in a reader's notebook.

Reading Time:

As your students read independently, confer with them about the theme of the big idea. Some children may have a more difficult time than others with synthesizing the information they gather from the text into a more abstract idea or life lesson. It can be helpful to encourage students to keep referring back to the text so that they don't go off on wild tangents. Keep saying, “What in the book makes you think that? Show me.”



If your students are not working within a reading workshop model, they can do this lesson as a community simply within the context of *Jumanji*.

Share:

Share the work of a student or students who have made strides toward determining the big idea or ideas in their independent texts. Make sure to ask the students to notice how important it is to tie their thinking to what the book actually says, even though they are moving beyond the text into the deeper meanings.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Readers:

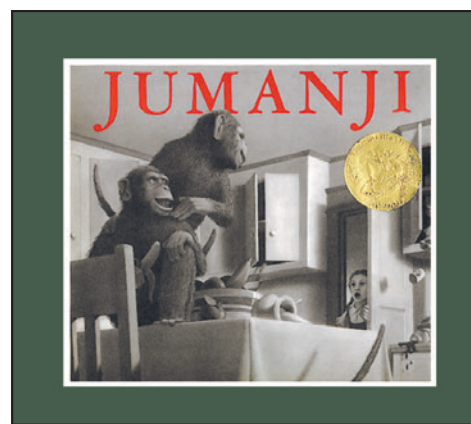
- More experienced readers will need less support from you. One way to go deeper into the ideas presented in this lesson is to organize your students into small groups, or book clubs, and invite them to discuss the big ideas of *Jumanji* in these clubs.
- Experienced readers will more easily transfer the ideas you discuss within this lesson to the context of their independent reading. Either in the context of book groups or partnerships, have your students study several of Chris Van Allsburg's books and look for consistent themes or big ideas across these stories and within each text.

Expanding This Lesson:

- Discuss inference with your students. Explain that as readers we must infer big ideas from the text. Writers don't just come out and tell us what their main messages are; they leave it to their readers to infer deeper meaning from the words on the page.
- Teach a lesson in which you invite children to make a record of evidence in the text that they can use to back up their big ideas. You can use *Jumanji* as a model and then invite children to do the same in their own reading, or you can focus on *Jumanji* as a community.

Just for Fun

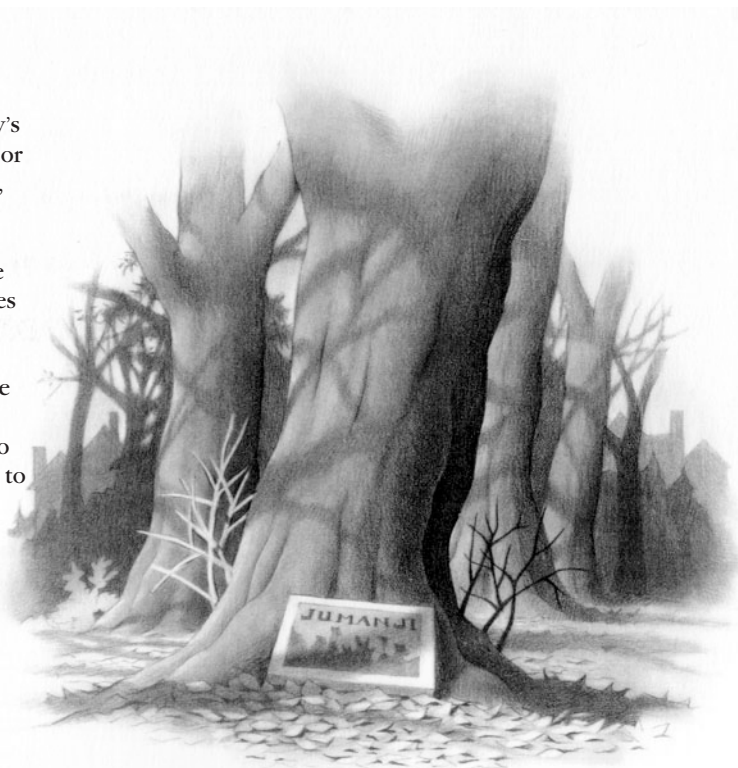
- In *Jumanji*, wild creatures and events enter into Peter and Judy's normal home life. Imagine a situation in which strange animals or events enter into the context of a very familiar situation (home, school, grandma's house, etc.) and then write about it.
- Invent your own magical board game. Think carefully about the rules of the game as you design it. Don't forget to write the rules down!
- Study the way Chris Van Allsburg wrote the instructions that are included with the Jumanji game. Notice how they proceed in a clear, step-by-step fashion. Think of something you know how to do really well, and write clear, step-by-step instructions on how to do it.



Jumanji

Caldecott Medal winner (1982)
 New York Times Best Illustrated Book of the Year
 Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Award
 School Library Journal, Best Books of the Year
 ALA Notable Book for Children
 Booklist Editors' Choice
 IRA/CBC Children's Choice

Blockbuster movie starring Robin Williams



BEN'S DREAM

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Book Summary

Ben and Margaret ride their bikes home from school as rain clouds gather over their town. Although they were hoping to play baseball that afternoon, they decide instead that they will each go home and study for tomorrow's geography test. Ben, after learning that his mother has gone shopping, settles into a chair with his geography book just as it begins to rain. The rain hitting the windowpanes makes Ben very sleepy.

With a jolt he "awakes" to find that his whole house is floating on a great sea. Ben runs to the porch. The house floats by the Statue of Liberty and Big Ben, both nearly submerged. The house floats under the Eiffel Tower's arch, past the Leaning Tower of Pisa, past the crumbling columns of the Parthenon, and in front of the Sphinx—where he sees another floating house with a small figure looking out of the window. He floats past the Taj Mahal and the Great Wall of China. As he floats past Mount Rushmore, George Washington himself opens his stone mouth to say, "Ben, wake up."

Ben opens his eyes to find that the storm has passed and that Margaret is at the window, ready to play baseball. As the two friends ride their bikes toward the park, Margaret tells Ben that she fell asleep doing geography, too, and had the strangest dream. She tells him how her house floated all around the world past landmarks half submerged in seawater. "Guess who I saw when I floated past the Sphinx," she says to Ben. As he guesses correctly, her jaw drops!

Special Features

Ben's *Dream* provides another example of Chris Van Allsburg's extraordinary ability to navigate between waking and sleeping worlds, between reality and fantasy. This time, the landmarks that Ben and Margaret have been studying in geography class come to life for them in an extraordinary way! As Ben drifts off to sleep in an armchair while studying for his geography test, Van Allsburg's textured pen-and-ink drawings seamlessly integrate his sleepy small-town home into very unusual contexts. We imagine that the rain that has lulled Ben to sleep has risen so high that the house is able to float like a great boat across the world.

It will be great fun for children who have some familiarity with the landmarks in the book to try to recognize them as Ben and his house float by. Teachers may want to review some of these places with students before reading the book in order to make the story more meaningful. The pictures speak for themselves as the house floats past the half-submerged forms of the Statue of Liberty and Big Ben. They stand out even more because of Chris Van Allsburg's typically innovative choices about perspective. Readers hover above

Big Ben's clock tower and look *through* the metal frame of the Eiffel Tower. These wordless pages invite children to study the drawings carefully. As Ben floats past the Sphinx, thorough examination will show that we are actually looking out at the Sphinx from the vantage point of Ben's porch. The house in the distance with the figure in the window is *another* floating home. "Whose?" we wonder. A particularly nice touch is the page about Mount Rushmore, in which the eyes of the stone presidents seem to rotate and focus on little Ben. It is George Washington who wakes Ben up.

As the story returns to the real world, the text returns as well. It is not George Washington waking Ben up, but Margaret at the window. A last trick in the book is when Margaret describes having the identical dream—and we realize exactly who the figure in the window of the other house by the Sphinx was.

Find Fritz

Fritz is the dog in the portrait on the wall of Ben's house on page 9.



Summary of Teaching Ideas

The most obvious place to use this wonderful book is within the context of a world landmark study—it seems designed specifically for that purpose! An amazing way to make geography more interesting (as Chris Van Allsburg clearly knows) is to imagine you are actually *at* the places described by the text. Things mean more to us when we have some personal experience with them. You can talk with your students about how to use a story or a personal experience to help remember facts. It can also be interesting for children to trace Ben's journey around the world on a real map or globe. Younger children who are still in the emergent phases of reading will enjoy and benefit from retelling the story of Ben's journey using the pictures: much of Chris Van Allsburg's story is told through illustrations. You can encourage your young students to retell Ben's journey using words.

Guiding Questions for a *Ben's Dream* Read-Aloud

- What is happening on the first page without words? Van Allsburg writes that Ben gets a little sleepy, “in fact, very sleepy. But then . . . How would you finish that sentence?
- As Ben and his house float on the sea, they pass some very interesting places. Can you recognize these places? Can you name them? Do you know where these places are in real life?
- When Ben passes the Sphinx, he sees another house. Who do you think is in the window? Why do you think that?
- At the end, we learn that Ben and Margaret have had the same dream. Do you think it was really a dream? How could two people have the very same dream?

Stories Can Help Us Remember Facts

An upper-grade writing/science lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Ben's Dream*
- Writing paper and pens/pencils for each student

Background Knowledge:

This lesson provides a way to integrate writing into other content areas. You may want to present this lesson in the context of science, geography, or math for example. This lesson will imagine a science lesson in which students have been studying the planets. However, it can easily be adapted to fit the needs of any situation requiring direct memorization in the content area of your choice—the memorization facts about the presidents, multiplication tables, and the water cycle for example.

Introduction:

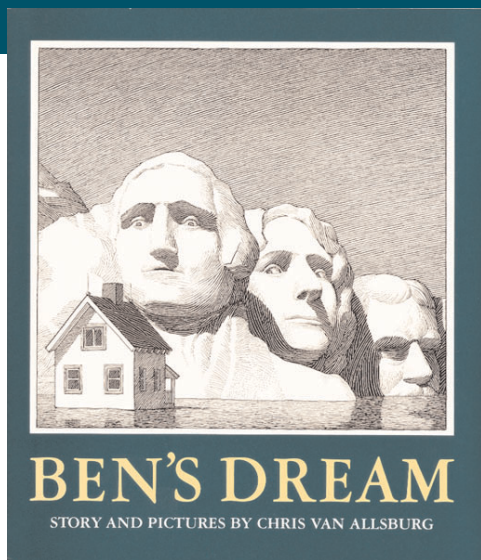
As your students gather around you in a central meeting place, tell them that you will be reading *Ben's Dream* out loud to them. Ask them to notice, as you read, how Chris Van Allsburg demonstrates that stories can help us remember facts about the world by providing us with a more personal experience of them. In the story, Ben has to memorize information about different geographical landmarks. His dream takes him on an actual journey through these places, which will undoubtedly help him remember what they are. Tell your students that they will be writing stories to help them remember all that they have learned about the planets.

Teaching:

Read *Ben's Dream* to your class. As you go through the pages without text, you may want to elicit from the children where you think Ben is and what landmark he is visiting.

Ask them to imagine how Ben feels as he swirls by these famous spots and views them from the comfort of his own floating front porch. As you finish reading, ask students to discuss how an experience of this sort might make it easier for Ben to remember the facts he must memorize for the next day's history test.

Tell your students that just like Chris Van Allsburg, they will be writing stories that will help them remember facts that they have learned about the planets. Discuss with the class how he probably did some research before writing his story. He didn't just invent



what the Taj Mahal and the Sphinx look like—he had to study them first. Tell your class that they will be using what they have studied about the planets (or whatever content you wish them to write about) to add facts to their stories. Ask them to imagine a journey through the planets. The story could start anywhere but must show the order of the planets from the sun. It may be presented as a dream or as a real journey.

Writing Time:

As your students write, you will want to confer with as many individuals as possible. Students may have trouble integrating facts into a fictional story, so this may be the focus of many of your conferences.

Share:

Choose several students to read excerpts of their pieces to the class. You will want to choose students whose pieces provide strong models for how to integrate facts with fiction.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Writers:

- Less experienced writers will usually have had less experience in other content areas as well, so this lesson may provide quite a challenge if you ask students to attempt it individually. The lesson could work beautifully, however, as either a group storytelling experience or a group story that you record on paper. If your class is studying seed germination, for example, you may present the situation to them: “We are going to go on a journey together to the underground world of the sprouting seed. What do you think we will see?” and then have them add on.

Expanding This Lesson:

- Have students work together to act out the stories they have created. A class studying the ocean may act out a tour of the layers of the ocean, with each student taking on the identity of an ocean creature. A class studying the planets may create a skit in which their classroom blasts off and tours the planets in order all the way to the sun. These skits could be presented to other classes.
- Create a class display in which you make a mural of the class's journey, including facts about the subject you are studying. Hang the students' stories nearby.

Strong Readers Retell Stories by Looking at the Pictures

A lower-grade reading lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Ben's Dream*
- A collection of picture books that are familiar to your students. It is helpful if some of them are wordless picture books. You may want to place a bin of these books at each of your students' tables.

Background Knowledge:

This lesson is designed for learners who are at the beginning stages of learning to read. Readers in the emergent phase of literacy benefit from learning to retell familiar books through the pictures, using the richly literate language of storybooks. *Ben's Dream* is a perfect model for this type of reading work, not only because the bulk of the story is actually told through the pictures and doesn't use words at all, but also because the structure is simple and easy for youngsters to follow. The pictures contain plenty of detail for

children to draw from. The beginning and ending text sets up a tone of richly literate language for students to pick up on and integrate into their own retellings.

Introduction:

As your students gather around you in a central meeting place in your classroom, tell them that they will be reading *Ben's Dream* together and working on telling the story through the pictures, as strong readers do. First read through the first few pages of text, setting the children up to understand the story.

Teaching:

When you get to the wordless pages, ask the students what they notice. They will probably notice the lack of text on the pages. Tell them that they will be working on telling the story that they see happening in the pictures.

Before you ask for their help, model what you mean for them to do. Beginning on the page where Ben “wakes up” in his dream, begin retelling the story through the pictures. Tell your students that you want to make it sound like a story, not just like a list of what you see: “Instead of saying, ‘I see a boy in a chair,’ make it sound like a story. Listen closely as I try this out . . . ‘Ben woke up with a start to find that his house was tilting back and forth. Drops of salty water sprayed in through the window. Ben ran out of the door to the front porch to take a look . . .’”

Tell your students that they will be trying this out in their own reading work, and that there is a bin of picture books on each of their tables. When they go off to their tables, they will be choosing a book to retell through the pictures, trying to make it sound just like a story.

Reading Time:

As your students go off to their tables and begin choosing and then retelling their favorite picture books, confer with them individually or in small groups. You will want to work on having them retell the story using storybook language. Many children tend simply to say out loud what they see in the book: “I see a big bear and a mama bear and a little bear. I see their house,” and so on, as opposed to “Once upon a time, three bears decided to go for a walk in the lovely woods around their home.” Modeling what you mean for children who are retelling in this way can be an extremely effective teaching strategy.

Share:

Choose a student to retell a book using rich storybook language. Ask other students what they notice about this child’s retelling. “Did it sound like a real story? What did Kahlil do with his voice and his words to make it sound like a real story?”

Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Readers:

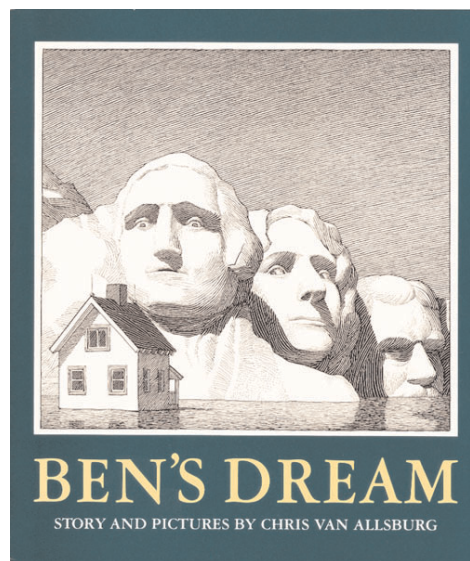
- While retelling stories through the pictures will be a less valuable activity for more experienced readers, they will certainly benefit from the act of creating their own wordless books. Deciding what details to include in the pictures that will give the readers a clear idea of what is happening in the story is a much more sophisticated activity. Older students might create their own wordless books to share with younger readers. The youngsters can then use these books to practice their own retellings!
- More experienced readers might actually write text to go along with the wordless pictures in Chris Van Allsburg’s book.

Expanding This Lesson:

- Encourage children to move from re-telling the stories individually to acting them out in small groups. This requires some extra help with management. If you have a couple extra adults in the room to help you work with small groups, you can hold the book and keep students on track as they act out the story. Acting out a story helps young children internalize both the sequence and the language of literature.
- Ask students to tell stories from their own lives using storybook language. You may do this as a class, retelling an experience that it has shared as a whole, or you may have individual children retell stories from their own experience.

Just for Fun:

- Imagine that Mount Rushmore comes to life for a day and you get to have a conversation with one (or each) of the presidents. What would you like to ask them?
- If you could float around in your house and visit other lands, where would you go? Why? Describe your adventures.
- Design a tour to important landmarks in your own town. If you were going to give a test on landmarks in your own neighborhood, what places would you choose?



Ben's Dream (1982)

- New York Times Best Illustrated Book of the Year
- ALA Notable Book for Children

“[Van Allsburg’s] skill in the lost art and subtle fine points of sculptural line drawing is nothing less than remarkable.”

— *Art Express*

THE WRECK OF THE ZEPHYR

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Book Summary

Traveling along the seashore, the author stops at a small fishing village. He decides to take a walk on a path that leads to the tops of some cliffs high above the sea. He is astounded to find the wreck of a small sailboat so far above the shore—and sitting near it, an old man. When the author asks how the boat came to be on the cliffs, the old man tells a story . . .

The man tells of a boy long ago from the village at the foot of the cliffs that was better than any other sailor in the harbor. He took risks that no other would take in order to prove his superiority. One stormy morning, the old man says, the boy hoists his sails and goes out, in spite of a fisherman's warning. As the boy sails out, the storm begins in earnest. A gust of wind knocks the boom against the boy's head and he falls to the floor, unconscious.

When the boy opens his eyes he is on a beach. The *Zephyr*, his boat, is on the sand near him, far from the reach of the tide. After walking a long time in search of help, the boy climbs an unfamiliar hill and is amazed to see two boats sailing by, high above the water, towing the *Zephyr* behind them. The boy watches the boats enter a harbor and leave the boat at a dock in a small fishing village. He climbs down to the dock and meets a sailor who tells him that the inhabitants of the island rarely see strangers because of the treacherous reef surrounding it. He offers to take the boy home, but the boy refuses to leave until he too has learned to sail above the water.

The next day, the sailor gives the boy a special new set of sails and tries unsuccessfully to teach him how to sail above the waves. He plans to take the boy home in the morning. After the sailor and his wife fall asleep, the boy sneaks out and tries to fly the *Zephyr* again. Under the full moon, the boy sails the *Zephyr* right up out of the water. He sets course for home. Feeling very pleased with himself, he flies higher and higher, certain he is truly the best sailor. He decides he will ring the *Zephyr*'s bell above his own town to prove to everyone how great he is—but as he nears the church, the *Zephyr* sinks down until it finally crashes into the trees on the cliff where the author met the old man.

The old man tells the author that the boy broke his leg that night, and that nobody believed his story about flying boats. He spent most of his life doing odd jobs and trying to find the mysterious island again. The author watches as the old man limps down the hill to go do some sailing.

Special Features

One is struck immediately by the rendering of light in Chris Van Allsburg's illustrations in *The Wreck of the Zephyr*. From the

late-afternoon glow when the author finds the *Zephyr*'s wreck high above the shore to the dark of the oncoming storm described in the old man's story, each picture captures the time of day and the mood of the sea vividly. The waves deepen and glow as the sunsets. Stars reflect on the sea's surface.

In addition to pictures that so vividly capture the moods of the sea, *The Wreck of the Zephyr* follows a mysteriously haunting storyline. Moving quickly from the voice of the author into the voice of the old man telling his story, we almost forget where we are, forget we are reading a book at all—much as the author must have forgotten his whereabouts as he sat on the cliff listening to the old man talk. This can be an interesting device to discuss with your students: sometimes the *I* voice can switch and tell another story.

The boy is proud of his sailing skill—so proud that he makes a foolhardy decision when he sails out into the storm. When the boom hits his head and knocks him out, we can wonder: Is the rest of the story a dream, or did it really happen? We don't know, even at the end of the story. When the boy awakes to find himself on the strange island, he will not rest until he learns the secret of sailing his ship above the waves. Despite the kind fisherman's efforts, the boy, frustrated by his lack of success with the sailing lessons, lets his pride get the best of him. He sneaks out into the night to practice on his own. Delighted to find that he can in fact sail above the waves, his pride carries him higher and higher until he reaches his home. Not content to have made his way back to his own people, the boy's pride urges him to show off even more and ring his boat's bell above the town so everyone can see. Immediately the boat falls through the trees and comes to rest on the cliffs, breaking the boy's leg in the process.

As the old man gets up to go, the author notices his limp. Could he be the boy in the story? Is the story true? As in so many of Chris Van Allsburg's books, we are left to make that decision on our own.

Find Fritz

Fritz is the dog standing near the fisherman who warns the boy not to go out on such a stormy day on page nine.





Summary of Teaching Ideas

The Wreck of the Zephyr provides us with the opportunity to study the device of nestling one story inside of another. The story that the old sailor tells the man quickly becomes the focus of the book—we almost forget how the book begins, in fact, until we are popped back out into the present day at the very end. In addition, *The Wreck of the Zephyr* provides a wonderful model for studying the idea of ambiguity. Van Allsburg often leaves his audience wondering and provides opportunities for readers to form their own opinions about what has happened. *The Wreck of the Zephyr* can be used with more experienced readers to discuss how strong readers form opinions of their own when the author doesn't come right out and tell them what has happened.

Another way that this book could be used in a reading workshop is to discuss how prideful characters are often taught lessons. The prideful young sailor, for example, flies too high and as a result crashes his boat into a tree. Can your students think of other books or stories in which characters that are full of pride pay a price? (The myth of Daedalus and Icarus comes to mind.)

Van Allsburg's writing and illustrations both consistently evoke a strong sense of place in each of his books—this is particularly so in *The Wreck of the Zephyr*. Descriptions of the setting are bolstered with details about the time of day and the ever-changing weather. Exploring how adding details about the weather and the time of day evoke a sense of place can be an interesting activity for young writers.

Guiding Questions for a Wreck of the Zephyr Read-Aloud

- Why do you think the boy decides to go sailing despite the fisherman's warning?
- Even though the sailor was kind in taking the boy in and trying to teach him to sail above the waves, the boy sneaks out and tries again on his own. Why is he taking advantage of the sailor's hospitality?
- What makes the Zephyr fall?
- Do you think the old man's story is true, or do you think he simply became unconscious and dreamed the whole thing? Why?
- Do you have any ideas about the old man's identity? What in the book makes you think that?

Strengthening our Descriptions of Setting by Adding Details About the Weather

A lower-grade writing lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Wreck of the Zephyr*
- Writing paper and pencils/pens for each student

Background Knowledge:

While this lesson will be most successful in the context of an

ongoing writing workshop in which students are engaged in writing independently each day about subjects of their own choosing, it can be presented on its own as well. You will want to have read and discussed *The Wreck of the Zephyr* with your students prior to presenting this lesson, as you will be focusing on one element of the text as opposed to experiencing the story as a whole. It is helpful if your students understand the concept of describing the setting when they write.

Introduction:

As your students gather near you in a central meeting place, explain to them that they will be examining how Chris Van Allsburg adds to his description of the setting in *The Wreck of the Zephyr* with details about the weather (both verbal and visual). Tell them that they will be trying out his strategy in their own writing that day.

Teaching:

Refresh your students' memories about the storyline before you read the following excerpt, asking them to notice how Van Allsburg describes the weather:

One morning, under an ominous sky, he prepared to take his boat, the Zephyr, out to sea. A fisherman warned the boy to stay in port. Already a strong wind was blowing. "I'm not afraid," the boy said, "because I'm the greatest sailor there is." The fisherman pointed to a sea gull gliding overhead. "There's the only sailor who can go out on a day like this." The boy just laughed as he hoisted his sails into a blustery wind.

Ask students to share how both Chris Van Allsburg's words and pictures describe the weather. How do these descriptions add to the reader's understanding of the setting? What kind of a morning is it? Why is it dangerous for the boy to be leaving port when a storm is on its way?

Tell your students that as they continue working on their own pieces, they should try adding a description of the weather because it helps the reader know even more about the setting, which in turn makes the story even more real.

Writing Time:

As your students write independently, confer with them individually, encouraging them to try out descriptions of the weather in their own stories.

Share:

Have as many children as you can share their descriptions of the weather in their own stories. Ask other students to report what they remember and notice how they get a clearer understanding of the setting when descriptions of the weather are included.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Writers:

- More experienced students will benefit from this lesson as-is—you can simply encourage them toward more sophisticated and literary descriptions of the weather. Where less experienced writers might say, "It was a bright and sunny day," more experienced writers might say, "The sun reflected off the skyscraper's windows. I had to squint when I looked up."

Expanding This Lesson:

- This lesson could be expanded into a several-day study on writing about setting. What other methods do writers use to describe the setting completely? Sometimes they write about the time of day. Sometimes they write about the light. Sometimes they write about what sounds they hear and what smells they smell. Each of these ideas could be turned into a day's lesson and then incorporated into students' descriptions of setting as a whole.

Decide for Yourself: Dealing with Ambiguity in Books We Read

An upper-grade reading lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Wreck of the Zephyr*
- Books at the students' reading levels for them to read independently

Background Knowledge:

It is helpful if children are comfortable working within the context of a reading workshop that provides time each day for them to read independently from books at their own levels. This lesson will work best when children are reading texts that are sophisticated enough to present some ambiguity—simpler texts tend to present more predictable plot lines. Read and discuss *The Wreck of the Zephyr* with your students before presenting this lesson so that they are able to absorb the story as a whole before exploring one particular line of thinking.

Introduction:

Tell your children that Chris Van Allsburg is a master of ambiguity—he often writes stories that walk a fine line between fantasy and reality, and he often sets up situations that leave his readers wondering what has really happened. You might want to briefly note some examples—in *The Stranger* we are never directly told the identity of the strange man who comes to stay with the Baileys. In *Jumanji* and *Zathura* we can't be quite sure whether or not the children are dreaming or really experiencing the fantastical events of the story. *The Wreck of the Zephyr* provides a wonderful example of how writers often leave some things up to the readers to decide and figure out for themselves. Strong readers make themselves aware of all the possibilities and then make decisions for themselves about what they think is happening.

Teaching:

As your students gather near you in a central meeting place, remind them that *The Wreck of the Zephyr* begins with an unnamed man, presumably the author himself, meeting the old sailor near the wreck of the *Zephyr* up on a cliff. The story the man tells the author quickly becomes the main storyline of the book. We follow the young boy as he is lost in the storm, as he finds the town where people sail their boats above the sea, as he sneaks out to try his



hand and sailing above the waves, and as he crashes into the trees above his own town. And then we remember that it is in fact the old sailor who is telling the story. As he finishes his tale, we read:

A light breeze blew through the trees. The old man looked up. "Wind coming," he said. "I've got some sailing to do." He picked up a cane, and I watched as he limped slowly toward the harbor.

As the story ends, we are left with several questions. We are led to believe that the old man may in fact be the same person as the arrogant young sailor of the story. But we are not told specifically whether or not this is the case. We are left wondering whether the man's story is the truth or merely the invention of a lonely old sailor whose boat was in fact blown up to the cliff by a storm.

We can remind our students that the situation is *ambiguous*; we are left to make decisions on our

own. There is no right answer to either question.

At this point, you will want to discuss the students' own opinions of the sailor's identity and the truth of his story.

Then tell your students that they will be looking for ambiguous situations in their own reading. Do the authors of their stories also leave room for readers to make their own decisions about things? As readers, you will encourage them to form their own opinions slowly, using evidence from the text to back up their thinking.

Reading Time:

As your students read independently, confer with them individually. Ask them to describe any ambiguous situations they may have come across in their reading lately. Encourage them to think through the opinions they form as readers, backing up what they tell you with evidence from the text.

Share:

Ask a student or students to share an ambiguous situation they came across in their reading. Ask them to describe the situation and then explain how they formed their own opinion of what happened.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Readers:

- Ambiguity is a difficult concept for less experienced readers to tackle—but forming opinions about what we read is not. Instead of focusing on the idea of ambiguity, focus on using evidence from the text to back up opinions students form about what they are reading.
- Devote an entire lesson to discussing the ambiguity in *The Wreck of the Zephyr* as a class. Approaching the concept as a whole class will allow you to support your students' thinking. You may want

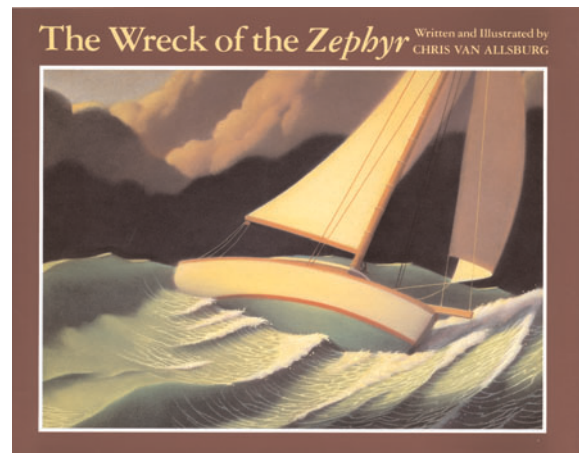
to chart students' ideas. You could even organize a debate between people who think that the sailor's story is true and people who think it is made up.

Expanding This Lesson:

- This lesson could fit nicely into the context of a study that urges children to back up their thinking with evidence from the text. You could teach children how to mark pages that affect their opinions and to keep a record of their thinking in a reading notebook.
- This lesson could also fit within the context of a study on inference—when authors don't come right out and tell us what has happened, we must infer from the text and from theories that we've already developed about the characters.

Just for Fun:

- What if the form of transportation that you use most was suddenly able to fly? Write a story about it—you could write about a flying bike, a flying train, a flying car—even flying shoes.
- Have you ever let your pride get the best of you? What happened? Write about it.



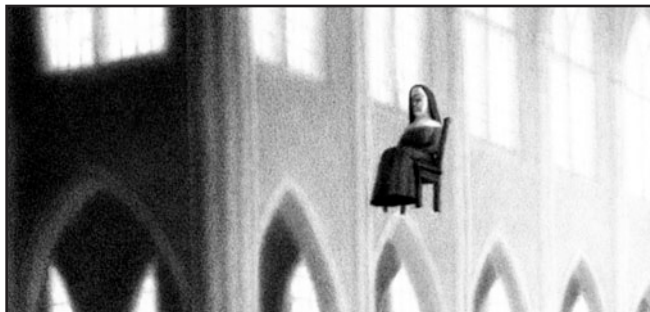
The Wreck of the Zephyr (1983)

- New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Book of the Year
- ALA Notable Book for Children
- Booklist Editors' Choice
- IRA Teachers' Choice

"The full-color pastel drawings are the work of a master: stunning, luminescent, and conveying a sense of the mystical and magical." — *Publishers Weekly*

THE MYSTERIES OF HARRIS BURDICK

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Book Summary

The Mysteries of Harris Burdick is a fascinating and unusual book. It is prefaced with an introductory letter from Chris Van Allsburg himself, explaining the book's origins. "I first saw the drawings in this book a year ago, in the home of a man named Peter Wenders," Van Allsburg begins. He goes on to explain that many years earlier, a man called Harris Burdick stopped by the office of Peter Wenders, who then worked for a publisher of children's books choosing stories and pictures to be made into books. Burdick brought one drawing from each of fourteen stories he had written as a sample for Mr. Wenders. Fascinated by the drawings, Wenders told Burdick he wanted to see the rest of his work as soon as possible. Promising to bring the stories in the next day, Burdick left— never to be seen again. The fourteen pictures he left behind—and their accompanying captions—remained in Wenders's possession until Mr. Van Allsburg himself saw them (and the stories that Wenders's children and their friends had long ago been inspired to write by looking at them). The mysterious pictures, writes Van Allsburg, are reproduced for the first time in the hope that they will inspire many other children to write stories as well.

Following the letter, fourteen mysterious and haunting images are reproduced, each with a title and a suggestive caption. Next to a drawing of a boy fast asleep in his bedroom with five small, round lights hovering in the air above him are the title *Archie Smith, Boy Wonder* and the caption "A tiny voice asked, 'Is he the one?'" An image of a huge ocean liner pushing into a narrow canal is titled *Missing In Venice* and captioned "Even with her mighty engines in reverse, the ocean liner was pulled further and further into the canal." The picture from *The Third-Floor Bedroom*, accompanied by the words "It all began when someone left the window open," shows a room that looks completely normal but for the wallpaper bird that seems to be coming to life and flying off the wall!

Each picture-and-caption pair is more mysterious and suggestive than the next and will provide children and adults alike with hours of entertainment.

Special Features

Each page of *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* functions almost like a writing lesson in and of itself—the pictures are designed with the express purpose of sparking the imagination, and indeed they do. One cannot help but begin piecing together stories as one pores over the illustrations and their mysterious captions.

We are immediately drawn into the mystery of this book by Van Allsburg's introductory letter, which sets up the premise in such a realistic way as to make even the savviest adult readers step back and ask, "Now wait a minute, is this for real?" Not only does each illustration present us with a mystery, but we are left at the end with the ultimate mystery: where is the talented Mr. Burdick? Why did he never return to Peter Wenders's office? Where are the stories he wrote?

The drawings in *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* are exquisite. Particularly striking are the contrasts Van Allsburg creates between light and dark—the sparks shooting out from the bottom of a house launching out into space; the round, glowing spots hovering over the sleeping boy's bed; the tiny lights shining over the harbor as the ghostly schooner appears; the pumpkin that glows ever brighter as the woman lowers her knife toward it. We are left to determine the exact mood of each picture on our own, however. Is the pumpkin glowing with malevolence or with a gentler power? Does a dark force or a positive one hurl the stone that comes skipping back into the boy's hand from the sparkling lake? The great power in this book is that so many of these decisions are left up to readers themselves.

Find Fritz:

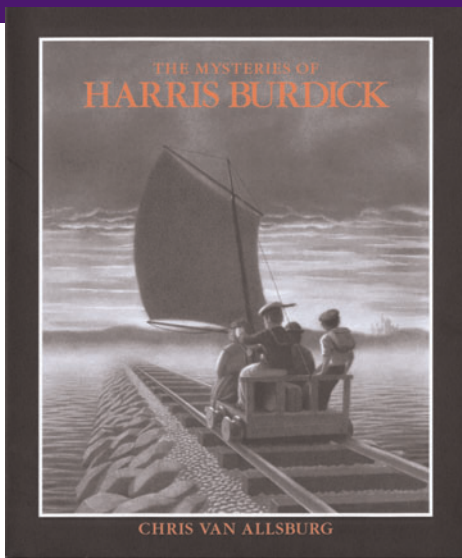
Fritz is the little dog accompanying the boy who finds a harp in the forest.



Summary of Teaching Ideas

This book makes inventing lessons easy on teachers because it was clearly designed by the author to stimulate children's imaginations. The book is a wellspring of stimulating creative writing "starters." The most obvious way we can use this book is to suggest that students do as Peter Wenders's children did (as described in Van Allsburg's introductory letter) and simply use the pictures and captions to write or tell their own stories. There are endless variations on this theme: children could be asked to choose one picture and write about it in one way, and then to write a completely different story based on the same picture. Each child could choose a different picture to write about and then they could read to one another and ask the listeners to link the stories with the pictures that inspired

them. Much younger children who are not yet experienced writers would have a wonderful time sitting in a circle and creating a story about one of the pictures together out loud, with each child adding on to the next. Teachers can record the stories that younger children invent about these pictures and read them out loud later. Children of all ages will enjoy acting out the stories they invent to go along with the pictures. More experienced writers will be up for a discussion about why exactly it is that these images and ideas are so stimulating to readers. What interests us about the scenarios Van Allsburg sets up? How can we as writers bring the same kind of intrigue into our own stories? We can discuss with our students how *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* is set up rather like a list of exciting writing ideas. This provides us with the opportunity to tell students that real writers actually *do* this—keep a notebook full of ideas for stories, poems, or books. In addition to encouraging children to write stories inspired by Van Allsburg’s writing, we can encourage them to be inspired by an aspect of his process as well: we can teach students to invent their own list of intriguing writing ideas, with pictures to go along, if they like. The options are endless—children can trade lists and write stories based on one another’s ideas, or they can choose one of their own ideas to develop into a story. A fun way to bring older and younger students together might be for a class of older students to collaborate on creating a “mysteries” book of their own, and then to present it to a lower-grade class and ask for help inventing stories to go along with the scenarios.



relatively quickly, it is possible to present this lesson to your students without having introduced them to the book on a previous occasion. However, because the book presents so many opportunities for rich discussion, you may want to spend some time in conversation about the book (using the guiding questions above as a place to start, if you wish) before presenting the lesson. While the lesson works best when presented in the context of a fiction-writing unit, it can be presented independently as well.

Introduction:

After reading the book *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* to your students, engage them in a brief discussion of the book’s context. Draw their attention to the fact that the book is meant to function almost as a

sourcebook for writing ideas. Tell them that many writers create their own lists of ideas to help them begin stories. Sometimes writers carry notebooks around and write down ideas when they come to them, so that when they sit down to write, they have many ideas to choose from. Tell your students that in addition to using *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* to inspire stories they write, they can use the concept the book presents to create lists of their own writing ideas. They will be using either the tiny notebooks you provide, or loose-leaf paper.

Teaching:

In *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, Chris Van Allsburg creates an exciting list of story ideas that make it almost impossible for us to not want to finish the stories on our own. He probably did not sit down and come up with all those ideas at once. He may have kept a list of ideas that grew gradually. Perhaps he even carried a notebook with him to write down ideas when they occurred to him. (The idea for Van Allsburg’s book *The Polar Express* began as an image he had in his mind of a train pulling up in front of a boy’s house!) Tell your students that they will be beginning their own lists of ideas in the small notebooks you provide.

Model for your students either on the overhead or on chart paper how you might go about beginning a list of story ideas. “I might ask myself, ‘What ideas have been bouncing around in my head lately that I haven’t had a chance to write?’” you may say – thinking aloud so your students can observe the process you are going through. Write a couple of ideas, modeling how you don’t necessarily need to write complete sentences when you are making notes to yourself. “A boy finds magic shoes in his grandmother’s attic—they make it so he can jump over trees.” “A little girl’s collection of plastic farm animals comes to life after midnight.” Use your own story-starter ideas to inspire your students to think creatively when recording their own ideas.

Tell your students that although they will be able to carry their little notebooks around with them so that they can record ideas when they occur to them, today’s writing time will focus on getting a good list started. They will be expected to write as many story ideas as they can during writing time. If they get stuck, they can always take a look at *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* to inspire them. Tell your students that a follow-up lesson will focus on how they can use their lists of ideas to start their own stories.

Writing Time:

During writing time, your students will be writing lists instead of stories, so they may appear to be less focused than usual. You may

Guiding Questions for a *Mysteries of Harris Burdick* Read-Aloud

- How does the letter Chris Van Allsburg writes to readers affect the way we read the book? How would our experience of reading the book be different if we skipped reading the letter?
- Each of the pages creates an evocative mood, but we might all interpret the moods differently because not everything is spelled out for us. Some of us might think, for example, that the picture of the man and the lump under the rug is frightening, and some of us might think it is funny. What do you think? Why?
- Chris Van Allsburg often writes stories in which unusual things happen in very normal-seeming situations—like the ocean liner pushing through the Venice canal. Can you think of other books, either by Van Allsburg or by other authors, in which unusual things happen in everyday places?

Creating Our Own Source of Writing Ideas

An upper-grade writing lesson

What You’ll Need:

- A copy of *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector
- Markers/overhead pens
- If possible, one small spiral-bound notebook for each child (otherwise loose-leaf paper works fine)

Background Knowledge:

Because the book doesn’t contain much text and can be read aloud

want to remind them that *thinking* is a big part of this process, so they do not necessarily need to be writing the entire time—but keeping the room quiet will help them all to focus on getting a good start on their ideas. As they write, confer with students individually.

Share:

Share the work of several students who have made headway in listing ideas they will use for stories later on. Choose students who have really stretched their imaginations—the more unique and creative ideas students are exposed to, the easier it will be for them to stretch their own minds as well.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Writers:

- Instead of having each student use an individual notebook, create a class list of ideas on chart paper to which students can refer. Instead of asking them to write stories based on ideas the class comes up with, you may want to have very young children tell the stories out loud. You can take dictation, and the students can illustrate their stories—or you could simply leave them as oral storytelling experiences.

Expanding This Lesson:

- Have the children use ideas they have written in their notebooks to write stories of their own. When they are finished, ask them to illustrate what they have written.
- Ask your students to carry the notebooks around with them for a week and write down ideas when they feel inspired. Have them share their ideas with one another. Discuss how it felt to catch an idea right away—did they find that they began having more ideas? Or remembering more ideas?
- Sometimes dreams contain excellent story ideas. Invite your students to record ideas in their notebooks that are presented by their dreams.

Collective Storytelling Inspired by *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*

A lower-grade lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*
- Chart paper and markers
- A space where all of your students can sit comfortably in a circle
- A “talking stick” or some other object for students to hold when it is their turn to speak

Background Knowledge:

It is helpful if students have previously read and discussed *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*. It is also helpful if they have had experience telling stories as a class before, although this is not necessary. Sitting in a circle and telling stories in which each child builds on what the last says is an excellent way to develop sequenc-



ing skills as well as story sense. In addition to being an altogether enjoyable process, group storytelling is an invaluable way to encourage speaking in front of groups and to develop listening skills as well.

Introduction:

As a class, choose a page from Chris Van Allsburg's *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* to “story-tell.” Look hard at the picture together and ask the children to notice as many details as possible. For purposes of explanation, I will use *Archie Smith, Boy Wonder* here.

Organize your students into a circle. Make certain that each student can see all the other students. Explain that you will be starting the story off, and that each child will be adding on to the story, one after another around the circle. Explain to your students that only the person who is holding

the magic “talking stick” (this can be simply a small stick or any other object you choose to indicate the speaker) is able to speak. The rest of the class should be listening hard so that when their turns come, they know what has happened so far in the story and will be able to add on a piece that makes sense.

Teaching:

This activity works best when the story is started in a clear, strong way, so it is usually a good idea for you to do this work yourself. Sit in the circle with your students and hold your “talking stick.” You may begin with something like, “Once upon a time there was a boy named Archie Smith. He seemed like a regular boy on the outside, but after his seventh birthday, strange things started to happen to him.” Then, pass the “talking stick” to the child next to you and ask him or her to continue the story. The tendency of small children is to make wild leaps; we want to encourage the wild leaps of imagination, but at the same time, it is important to teach students how to fit their thinking onto the previous idea.

You may want to intervene at some points if children add a thought to the story that is totally unrelated to what you've been talking about. This is to be expected. Simply remind students of what was said previously and then encourage them to add on only the next step. You may want to stop two or three times and recount what has happened so far; this not only models retelling but will strengthen their sense of the story as it builds and make it easier for them to add on something that makes sense. You will also need to be in control of the tendency many young children have to end stories as soon as possible—it is tricky to slow down and go step by step! Remind them often that only the last person can end the story so that every student's voice is heard. If they try to end it—“And then he woke up, the end!”—you will want to encourage them to think again and add a detail that stretches the story even further.

Share:

After you have finished the story (and don't worry if it is not completely cohesive and brilliant—storytelling in this fashion takes a lot of practice!), debrief with your students. What was hard for them? What was easy? What was fun? Reinforce the idea that they have created a brand-new story together as a

community, starting with only a tiny seed of an idea presented by Chris Van Allsburg. Tell them that you will be practicing this activity again, using the same story idea.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Writers:

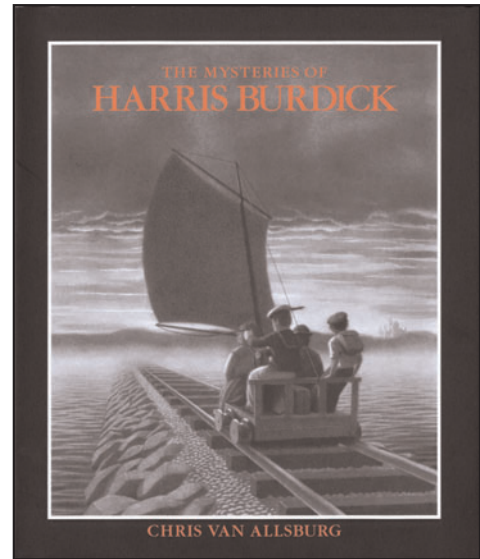
- Have students write their own versions of the story you told as a class.
- After having practiced this activity as a class, divide your students into groups of four or five and have them choose a different idea from the book to tell as a small group. Have groups present their stories to one another.

Expanding This Lesson:

- After having practiced the story several times, invite another class to come and listen.
- Write the words of the story into a book that the students can illustrate.
- Keep the book in a special place in your classroom library.
- Try the same process with another story idea from *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*.
- Try the same process using a story [au: idea?] that comes from an experience your class shared together (in real life).

Just for Fun

- Try writing a letter directly to your readers just as Chris Van Allsburg does to set up *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*.
- Try writing a story about one of the pictures with the idea that you want to convey one particular emotion. Next, using the same picture, write the story with a completely different emotion in mind.
- Write new captions to go along with the illustrations—how do the new captions change your interpretation of the pictures?
- Write an answer to the mystery of Harris Burdick himself.



The Mysteries of Harris Burdick

Boston Globe/Horn Book Award

New York Times Best Illustrated
Children's Books of the Year

“Layered in mystery, this extraordinary book will stun imaginative readers of all ages.”
—*School Library Journal*, Starred

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE POLAR EXPRESS™

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Visit
www.polarexpress.com
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of Chris Van Allsburg's
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Book Summary

One Christmas Eve many years ago, a boy lies in bed, listening hard for the bells of Santa's sleigh, which he has been told by a friend do not exist. Later that night he hears not bells but a very different sound. He looks out of his window and is astounded to see a steam engine parked in front of his house! The conductor invites him to board the Polar Express, a train filled with children on their way to the North Pole. The boy and his companions journey past tiny towns and forests full of wild creatures. They travel up and around mountains and across the Great Polar Ice Cap to the magical city at the North Pole. The train takes the children to the center of the city, where Santa and the elves have gathered for the giving of the first gift of Christmas. The boy is chosen to receive this first gift. Knowing that he can choose anything in the world, he decides on a simple gift: one silver bell from Santa's sleigh. Santa cuts a bell from a reindeer's harness and the delighted boy slips it into his bathrobe pocket as the clock strikes midnight and the reindeer pull the sleigh into the sky.

When the children return to the train, the boy realizes the bell has fallen through a hole in his pocket. Heartbroken, he is returned to his home. In the morning, his little sister finds one small box with the boy's name on it among the presents below the Christmas tree. Inside is the silver bell! The boy and his sister are enchanted by its beautiful sound, but their parents cannot hear it. The boy continues to believe in the spirit of Christmas and is able to hear the sweet ringing of the bell even as an adult.

Special Features of *The Polar Express*

The arrival of a steam engine—the Polar Express—on the boy's quiet street is startling and wonderful enough to make readers gasp out loud. This book in particular captures the magic of childhood with sensitivity and grace. The warm and vivid color pastels create expressive characters and scenes that are very much alive. The artwork, combined with Chris Van Allsburg's vivid prose, creates a journey that resonates on many levels for readers of all ages. This is a book to return to year after year.

The vivid visual world of *The Polar Express* is evoked by the text as well as by the pictures. Van Allsburg constructs a distinct sense of place, infused with magic by his skillful use of metaphor and simile. The train is "wrapped in an apron of steam," and the children drink hot cocoa "as thick and rich as melted chocolate bars." The lights of the North Pole appear to the boy as "the lights of an ocean liner sailing on a frozen sea."

The Polar Express is another example of Van Allsburg's ability to seamlessly blend the dream world with reality. Also a consistent theme in his work, *The Polar Express* describes a journey (both literal and symbolic) that brings about transformation for the characters and the reader as well. In *The Polar Express*, Van Allsburg chooses an object to represent an idea: the silver bell symbolizes not only a belief in magic, but a kind of joyful openheartedness that many children have—and that many grown people have forgotten. *The Polar Express* reminds children and adults alike that the world is full of wonder—all one must do is look for it, and listen, and believe.

Find Fritz:

Fritz the dog shows up in *The Polar Express* as a puppet on a post of the boy's bed frame.



Summary of Teaching Ideas

One of the most striking features of *The Polar Express* is its vivid sensory description. Children can be encouraged to notice the way Van Allsburg uses all of the senses when describing the boy's journey. For example, the reindeer "pranced and paced, ringing the silver bells that hung from their harnesses. It was a magical sound, like nothing I'd ever heard." He describes the sensation of the train rolling up and down the mountains "like a car on a roller coaster," and the taste of rich hot cocoa. This type of description provides a wonderful model for children who are working on writing fresh and unusual description.

Van Allsburg's writing also evokes a distinct sense of place. He writes, "the train thundered through the quiet wilderness," describing the striking contrast of the thundering train and the quiet woods. It can be helpful to examine his descriptions of the setting (which changes as the train makes its way to the North Pole), as it can be useful in the context of both reading and writing. When we are reading, for example, we can gather information about the story by paying close attention to the setting. It helps make the world of the story real for us. Van Allsburg's stories do not take place in a void but instead are rooted firmly in believable settings.

Because the story describes a journey with a clear beginning, middle, and end, it is an excellent story to use with younger children who are working on retelling a story. Children must be taught to fully absorb a story in order to develop theories and make meaning of the text. Retelling the story helps children not only remember what happened but also to choose the important parts and sequence them. This story is particularly suited to this activity—it has a clear storyline and many details, providing an opportunity for students to practice sifting through information to find important structural elements.



• Ask the students to bring an object to school that holds as much meaning for them as the boy's bell holds for him. Follow your read-aloud and book conversation with a share circle. Discuss how it is not just the objects themselves that we love; it is the people and ideas that they represent or remind us of. You may want to invite your students to write about their special objects and what those objects represent.

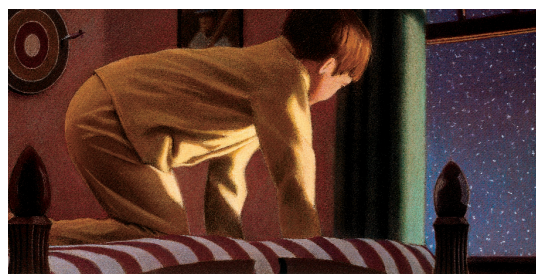
Below you will find several ideas for how you might undertake a *Polar Express* reading and celebration in your classroom as well as some guiding questions aimed to develop rich book conversation when discussing *The Polar Express* with your students. You will also find two sample lessons: a writing lesson designed for upper grade students using *The Polar Express* to teach the use of simile and metaphor in description, and a reading lesson designed for lower grade students who are working on retelling. Below each lesson are some ideas for adaptation for either older or younger children, and some suggestions for expanding the lesson. Finally, you'll find some additional fun language arts activities based on *The Polar Express*.

Ideas for a Polar Express Reading Celebration!

- Invite students (and their families, if you wish!) to come to school in the morning in their pajamas. Your students will be delighted if you join them in this endeavor! Sit all together in a cozy spot in your classroom or the school library and read the book aloud. Follow the read-aloud with a book conversation (see some sample guiding questions for a *Polar Express* book talk below). Add to the magic by celebrating with hot cocoa “as thick and rich as melted chocolate bars” and candy with nougat centers “as white as snow.” (Cookies and instant hot chocolate or even regular chocolate milk easily do the trick. You can even make cookies in the shape of trains—train cookie cutters can be found in many cooking stores.)
- Younger children will be thrilled if, on the day of the reading, you set up their chairs in two rows like the seats of a train. Give the students train tickets, which you will collect as you invite them to take a seat on *The Polar Express*. You can even ask them to buckle themselves in! This kind of dramatization invites young readers into the magic of the story in an accessible, tangible way.
- In the days leading up to the reading, using a roll of craft paper, make a train mural for your hallway or classroom. Cut out the “cars” yourself and then cut yellow squares of paper for the windows. Have the children draw themselves on the yellow squares—when you glue them on the cars it will look like the children are riding on the train. Gather around the mural as you read.
- Find a bell that resembles the boy's bell in *The Polar Express*. When you are reading the book and the boy receives the bell, take out your silver bell and show the students. When you read that only those who truly believe can hear the bell, ring the bell for your students and ask if they can hear it!

Guiding Questions for a Polar Express Book Conversation

- **T**he boy's friend told him that Santa doesn't exist, but the boy continues to believe. Think of a time in your own life that you have experienced this situation. How does it feel to keep firm when other people tell you you are wrong?”
- Notice how Chris Van Allsburg adds to his descriptions of the train ride to the North Pole by comparing one thing to another (give some examples). How does this kind of descriptive language add to the story for you?
- The boy can ask Santa Claus for anything in the world. Why do you think he chooses a simple bell?
- Why can the boy and his sister hear the bell while their parents cannot?
- Why can the boy still hear the bell as an adult, while his sister and friends cannot?
- What do you think Chris Van Allsburg wants the bell to represent?



Simile and Metaphor in *The Polar Express* An upper grade lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Polar Express*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector with a T chart: “plain language” on one side and on the other “comparisons”
- Markers/overhead pens
- Writing paper and pencils for the students

Background Knowledge

It will be helpful if the children are familiar with the story before you teach this lesson. It is important to give students a chance to experience the story as an unbroken whole, and then to discuss it as a class, before isolating one element as a teaching tool. This lesson is designed to be used in the context of a writing workshop

in which students are writing every day on topics of their own choosing. It can fit well within either a personal narrative study or a fiction study. The lesson can be taught outside the context of a writing workshop as well.



Introduction

Remind the students of the way that *The Polar Express* “comes to life” in our minds as we read. Tell them that one way authors bring stories to life is to focus on the way they describe places. In *The Polar Express*, Chris Van Allsburg describes the journey of the train in a really interesting way—by comparing one thing to another. Tell the students you will be showing them what you mean and inviting them to try this in their own writing.

Teaching

Tell your students to pay attention as you read aloud some excerpts from the book where Van Allsburg is comparing one thing to another, because you will be asking them to tell you about those parts later. Read them excerpts of the book that include similes like “hot cocoa as thick and rich as melted chocolate bars,” and “rolling over peaks and through valleys like a car on a roller coaster.” You may even want to ask them to silently raise a hand when they hear a comparison.

Ask the students to look at the chart you have started—a simple T-chart with “plain language” on one side and “comparisons” on the other. Ask students to tell you what comparisons they heard. As they answer, write the similes they noticed on the “comparisons” side of the chart.

Discuss how the same image might have been described in a plain and boring way. For example, “the hot cocoa was sweet and good,” or “the train went up and down the hills.”

Write the “plain language” ideas next to their corresponding similes on the chart paper. Discuss with your students how using comparisons in descriptions can make the story come to life. Encourage them to try using a comparison or two in their own writing that day.

Writing Time

As your students write independently, confer with them about their work. Encourage them to use comparisons in their descriptions like Chris Van Allsburg does, in order to make their writing come to life.

If you do not have an ongoing writing workshop in place in your classroom, you can give your students more structure before you send them off to write. For example, you may want to ask them to imagine they are on a dream-journey like the boy’s journey on the Polar Express, and then to write that story. In the context of that assignment, you can confer with them about using comparisons in their writing.

Share

After your students have worked independently, bring the class back together. Share the work of a student or several students who tried out the idea of using comparisons in their descriptions.

Adapting This Lesson for Less Experienced Writers

- Instead of eliciting the “comparisons” from the students, point them out.
- Spend more time scaffolding their understanding. Create some comparisons together before sending the children off

to write on their own. For example, choose an object in the room to describe in a plain way (“the ceiling is gray”) and then using a comparison (“the ceiling is as gray as rain clouds”).

Expanding This Lesson

Notice the many different “craft moves” Chris Van Allsburg uses in *The Polar Express*. Make a chart listing them, and then turn each “craft move” into a day’s lesson.

- Describing the setting so clearly that readers feel they are there
- Using the five senses in description
- Writing the main character’s thoughts and feelings into the story
- Describing the weather

Retelling The Polar Express Using a Timeline A lower grade lesson

What You’ll Need:

- A copy of *The Polar Express*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector
- Markers/overhead pens
- Paper, pencils, and books for students to read on their own

Background Knowledge

It is helpful if your students are familiar with *The Polar Express* before you teach this lesson. It is also helpful if your students are familiar with the concept of a timeline. The lesson works best in classrooms where “read aloud” is a part of each day, a time when your classroom community gathers together and develops comprehension through book discussions. The lesson is designed for classrooms that support ongoing “reading workshop” work, where students read independently or in partnerships each day from books of their own choosing. This depends on having a leveled classroom library stocked with books appropriate for young readers. If you do not use reading workshop in your curriculum or do not have a leveled classroom library, the lesson can take place in the context of the stories your students are working with in their readers. Before this lesson, it is important to organize your students into “talk partnerships” and to ask them to sit next to these partners when they come to the rug. You will be asking them to turn and talk to each other during the lesson.

Introduction

Tell your students that one thing that helps readers make sense of the stories they read is to stop and retell what has happened so far, including only the important parts in their retelling. One way that readers keep track of the important parts and how they fit together is to make a timeline. Tell your students to watch you as you begin to read Chris Van Allsburg’s *The Polar Express*, paying attention to how the story moves forward, and make a timeline to help you retell the story. Tell them that they will be asked to help you with this process, and then they will get to try it out with their own books during independent reading time.



Teaching

As you read the story, tell the children to pay attention to how you stop, retell what has happened so far, add the important parts to your timeline, and then continue to read. Begin reading the story. Stop after a few pages—one good first stopping point is when the boy gets on the train. Model retelling what has happened so far in the story, paying attention to only the most important parts. For example, you might say, “The boy was lying awake waiting to hear the sounds of Santa’s sleigh bells. Instead he heard a train. He ran outside and the conductor invited him on board the Polar Express, a train bound for the North Pole.”

Then, show your students how they might begin a timeline. Draw a line on your chart paper or overhead and add the first bit. Tell your students that when you are making a timeline, you do not need to write complete sentences—it is more like writing notes to yourself to help you remember. The first point on the timeline might be “boy is in bed waiting to hear Santa.” The second might be “boy hears train outside—gets on Polar Express.” As you continue reading, turn over more responsibility to the students. The next time you stop, ask them to turn and talk to their partners, retelling what has happened so far. Give them only two or three minutes for this. When you come back together, elicit the next points on the timeline from your students. If they offer small details or go off on unrelated tangents, model for them how readers decide what the most important parts of the story are when they are doing a retelling and making a timeline. Tell them that they will be doing this on their own when they go off to read independently.

Reading Time

If you work within a reading workshop context, when you send your students off to read independently, ask them to sit next to their talk partners. As they begin reading, remind them to stop every few pages and retell what has happened so far in their own books. If your students use reading response notebooks, ask them to create their own timelines in their notebooks. They can do this on loose-leaf paper if they don’t use notebooks. As your students read, confer with them about how readers retell only the most important parts of stories and put those things on a timeline.

If you do not work within the context of reading workshop, you can choose to keep your students together on the rug and finish the timeline of *The Polar Express* as a community. You can also ask your students to work within their readers to create a timeline of whatever story they happen to be working on together. You can organize them into partnerships for the context of this lesson even if they do not generally work this way. Because retelling depends on talking, it is very helpful for the children to be in partnerships.

Share

When you come back together at the end of independent reading time, share the work of a reading partnership that has created timelines of the stories they have read, making sure to put only the most important parts on the line.

Adapting This Lesson for More (or Less) Experienced Readers

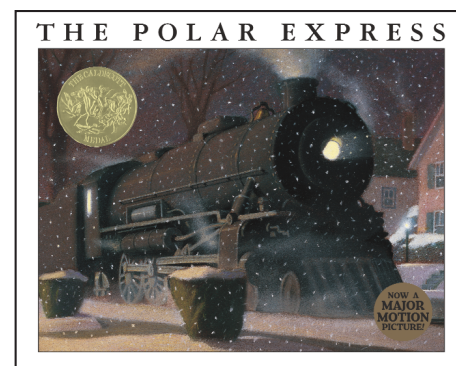
- If you are working with very young children who are not writing or reading independently yet, focus on the retelling aspect as opposed to the timeline aspect of this lesson. Even kindergartners can successfully retell a story they have heard.
- This is a simple lesson, but older children also benefit from slowing down their reading and retelling what has happened in their books. If your students are reading complex chapter books, you can teach them to retell each chapter separately and then link those retellings together to retell the whole book.

Expanding This Lesson

- Focus on the sequencing aspect of writing a timeline—demonstrate “messing up” the sequence of your Polar Express timeline and ask the children to help you organize it sequentially.
- Focus on retelling—when you stop every few pages to retell, it is important to link each retelling to the previous ones, so that by the end you are retelling the whole book.
- Use your timelines to discuss how the characters change as the plot moves forward. What are the turning points?

Just for Fun

- Imagine you are able to go on a magical journey like the boy. Where do you go? How do you get there? How are you changed by the experience?
- The boy’s bell is magic—only he can hear it. Imagine you find or are given a magic _____ that only you can _____ (you fill in the blanks). Describe how this object changes your life.
- The boy chooses a simple, meaningful gift over a fancy gift that is meaningless. Think of someone you love very much. What kind of gift could you give that person that would mean as much as the boy’s bell? It doesn’t have to be a real object!



The Polar Express (1985)

ISBN 0-395-38949-6 \$18.95

- Caldecott Medal winner, 1986
- 5 million copies sold worldwide
- New York Times Best Illustrated Book
- *New York Times* Bestseller

THE STRANGER

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Plot Summary

Late one summer, Farmer Bailey has an accident. Driving along in his truck, he hits a man dressed in an unusual suit of leather. The farmer brings the stunned and confused (but otherwise unharmed) fellow back with him to his home. Farmer Bailey's wife and daughter welcome the stranger. The doctor comes and tells the Baileys that the man has temporarily lost his memory but will probably be fine in a few days. The man stays on and becomes a part of the family in spite of his odd ways: wild animals are not afraid of him and he can work all day without sweating or tiring.

It was late summer when the stranger came to live with the Baileys, and while fall has come to the surrounding areas, the weather remains unchanged on the Baileys' land. The stranger becomes increasingly concerned when he compares the orange and red leaves of autumn across the hill with the green leaves of the Baileys' trees. Soon he can think of nothing else but the drab green leaves, until one day he pulls a leaf from a tree and blows on it. It immediately turns orange. The stranger remembers who he is! He dresses in his old clothes and bids the Baileys goodbye. As he leaves they notice that the leaves have all turned and the air is cold and crisp. Every autumn thereafter, the trees at the Bailey farm stay green for a week longer than the trees to the north, and then change overnight. In the frost on the farmhouse windows the Baileys read the words "See you next fall."

Special Features

The color pastel drawings that infuse all of Van Allsburg's work with characteristic vibrancy are an important element of *The Stranger*. The face of the stranger is rendered particularly expressive, at first in his confusion and then in his astounding rediscovery of his identity. In this book perhaps even more than the others, the reader is challenged to piece together a mystery: Who *is* this unusual man? Van Allsburg's thoughtfully placed hints build suspense and draw readers in. Rather than directly revealing who the silent man in leather is, the author leaves clues in the pictures and the text that allow readers to draw their own conclusions. Even at the end of the story there remains some ambiguity and room for children to maintain differing opinions—which provides excellent material for con-

versations about the book!

Both pictures and words work to describe the weather and seasons in detail—an approach central to this story but also an important addition to any description of setting. The author doesn't simply tell us that it is late summer. His pictures capture the lengthening light of early autumn, and he writes, "The warm days made the pumpkins grow larger than ever. The leaves on the trees were as green as they'd been three weeks before."

Students can also learn from Van Allsburg's description of the stranger. He is an unusual and mysterious character. Because he is not typical, he is interesting. Van Allsburg describes his physical appearance: "The man on the sofa was dressed in odd, rough leather clothing." He describes his actions: "He looked up with terror and jumped to his feet. He tried to run off, lost his balance, and fell down." And it is these descriptions of the stranger's peculiar behavior that give readers insight into the mystery of his identity: "The fellow seemed confused about buttonholes and buttons," and "The steam that rose from the hot food fascinated him." We are intrigued when instead of running away, wild rabbits run right into the man's arms. Students can learn about the construction of a character both as readers and as writers by studying *The Stranger*.

Find Fritz:

Fritz the dog is hidden among a flock of sheep. He's the last little figure on the left.



Teaching Ideas

The Stranger offers the thrilling challenge of piecing together the mystery of a man's identity. Readers can be asked to develop a theory that explains the enigma (he embodies the spirit of autumn, he is responsible for bringing fall to the land, he is "Jack Frost" or the one to bring the first frost of the season, etc.) and then to look back in the book for text evidence to support the theory. For example, when the doctor assumes his thermometer is broken, it may be because the man is very cold inside—as one who brings cooler temperatures might be. When the man blows on his soup, a cool draft is felt. The rabbits run toward rather than away from him because they are creatures of the wild, as is he. Younger children may need some support from you in order to enter into a discus-

THE STRANGER



sion of this kind, as the clues are subtle, but even they will eagerly search for clues to support their theories. Students writing stories can use *The Stranger* as a mentor text as they work to develop unusual and well-rounded characters of their own.

Taking this discussion a step further, more experienced readers and writers may be interested in studying how Van Allsburg builds suspense in *The Stranger*. He leaves clues that are clear enough to provoke thinking and guessing but not so blunt as to remove the sense of mystery and wonder.

Students can also benefit from examining the inclusion of descriptions of weather and the seasons. Van Allsburg creates compelling settings in which his characters operate. Encouraging students to add details about the weather or the seasons can enrich their descriptions of the worlds in which their own characters move.

Guiding Questions for Reading *The Stranger* Aloud

- What does it mean when mercury is stuck at the bottom of a thermometer? What might this mean about the stranger's temperature? Do you think the thermometer is really broken?
- What does the stranger's interaction with the rabbits teach us about his character? Why do you think the rabbits are so comfortable with him?
- What do we know about the season when we see geese flying toward the south? Why is the stranger so fascinated by the geese he sees?
- What is happening when the stranger blows on the leaf? Look closely at the picture. What changes about the leaf as he blows on it? Look closely at his face. What does his expression mean?
- Who do you think the stranger is? What in the book makes you think that?

Writing About Characters Using Specific and Unusual Details

A lower-grade writing lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Stranger*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector
- Markers/overhead pens
- Writing paper and pencils for the students
- A prepared character description of your own

Background Knowledge:

This lesson works best for children who have been exposed to *The Stranger*. Because the book is mysterious, it is important to have had discussions with your class during which you have encouraged students to build theories about the stranger's identity. Especially with younger students, some extra support will help them to understand this complex and lovely story in a deeper way. It is helpful, but not at all necessary, if children are involved in a writing workshop unit in which they are writing narratives with characters—either fictional or from their own lives.

Introduction:

Remind your students what a complex and interesting character Van Allsburg has created in *The Stranger*. Ask them what they think makes the character so interesting to us. They may say that he does unusual and unexpected things, or that strange things happen when he is around. Tell them that writers work hard to create unusual characters so that readers will be curious about them. Tell them that they are going to try to emulate Van Allsburg in their own work by writing down specific and unusual details that describe their own characters.

Teaching:

Write "Stranger" at the top of your chart paper or overhead. Ask your class to think of details from the book that describe the stranger. What are the things that stick in their minds?

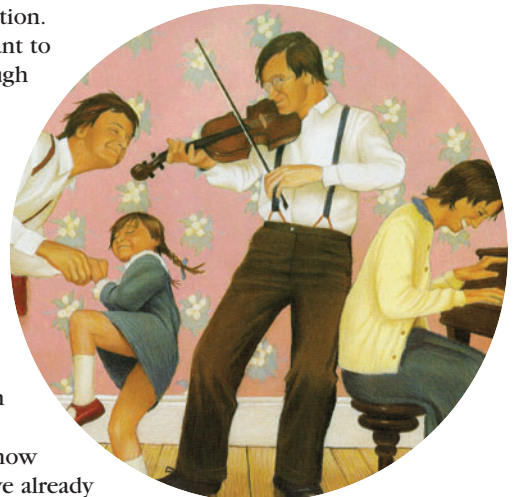
You will want to refresh their memories by rereading some descriptive passages from the text. For example, "The man on the sofa was dressed in odd, rough leather clothing," or "The fellow seemed confused about buttonholes and buttons . . . The steam that rose from the hot food fascinated him," or "The stranger never tired. He didn't even sweat." You may want to choose passages that describe what the stranger *does* as well as how he looks and feels. For example:

He walked across the yard, toward two rabbits. Instead of running into the woods, the rabbits took a hop in his direction. He picked one of them up and stroked its ears, then set it down. The rabbits hopped away, then stopped and looked back, as if they expected the stranger to follow.

After reading some of these passages to your students, write the details they observed on chart paper. Ask your students to notice how interesting the character of the stranger is as a result of the unusual details Van Allsburg uses to describe him. Tell them that in their own writing they will be trying out a character description, keeping in mind that they want to develop a character as interesting as Van Allsburg's by writing unusual details into their description.

If your students seem to need more modeling, you can show them what you mean by writing a character description.

Clearly, you will want to have thought through your description ahead of time. Tell your students that you tried to think like Van Allsburg in order to write unusual details about the character in the story you've been working on. Either begin writing in front of your students, or show them what you have already prepared. You might want to include some boring descriptions like "he is nice," and ask your stu-



dents to point out the place where you should add a specific, unusual detail. Have them help you to do this. Then send them off to try their own character descriptions!

Writing Time:

As your students write, confer with them individually about their character descriptions. Ask them to think hard about whether they are imagining and then writing unusual and specific details about their characters, or writing abstract and boring descriptions. Help them along by asking them guiding questions, like “What does your character eat? What does he keep in his pockets? What is his favorite book?”

Share:

Share the work of a child who has written about his or her character using specific and unusual details, as Van Allsburg does.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Writers:

- Discuss the difference between a flat character that is simple and predictable and an interesting character that is complex and surprising. Make a chart for your room that contrasts the traits of a flat character your students have read about and the character of the complex stranger.
- Talk about how writers often make their main characters more complex and interesting than their supporting characters. Ask your students to think about why this might be. Discuss these ideas in the context of *The Stranger*. Ask your students to make sure that the main characters in their own stories are as complex and interesting as the stranger.

Expanding This Lesson:

- Organize your students into writing partnerships. Ask them to read their character descriptions to each other. Ask them to tell their partner when they can really see and imagine the character that he or she has created, and, in a kind way, to say when the description is vague. Ask them to add to their descriptions, using the constructive feedback they received from their partners.
- Ask your students to think about where the stranger might have gone after he left the Baileys' farm. Have them write about the stranger's continuing adventures!

Collecting Clues to Build a Theory About a Character in *The Stranger*

An upper-grade reading lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Stranger*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector
- Markers/overhead pens
- Paper, pencils, and books for students to read on their own

Background Knowledge:

This lesson can be done with students who are not yet familiar with *The Stranger*. In fact, the lesson may be more successful if the book is new to them, because it focuses on collecting clues (text evidence) from the book as they read. This approach helps students to



develop theories about the stranger's identity that are tied to the text. The lesson works nicely within the context of a mystery study, but can be presented within any reading unit.

Introduction:

Tell your students that you will be reading a book to them that contains a mystery—a man cannot remember who he is! Their job, as you read the

book, will be to listen very carefully for clues in the words and pictures that will help them to solve the mystery of the man's identity. Paying attention to clues is an important skill to use when we are reading mystery stories, but it is also an important part of every kind of reading. When we pay attention to clues, we build theories that are based on what the book actually tells us. Authors are tricky that way—they hide information that we get to search out and use to figure out what's happening! Tell your students that today they are going to practice this—first in *The Stranger*, and then in their own books.

Teaching:

Read *The Stranger* to your class. As you read, ask the children to raise a thumb when they notice something that may be a clue to the man's identity. Write down what they notice on chart paper or on an overhead projector. They will be likely to notice such things as the way the rabbits behave around the man, his ability to work all day without sweating, or his confusion about simple things like buttons. Before you reach the page that describes the man blowing on the leaf, reread the list of clues the class has collected. Discuss how this list might help readers build a theory about the man's identity. The students are likely to have different theories to share and you may want them to turn and talk to a neighbor about their theories before you discuss a selection of these ideas with the entire class. Make sure to draw your students' focus back to the process of building theories with the clues they have collected. If they describe a nonsensical theory that is not related to the book, ask, “What in the book makes you think that?”

Tell your students that readers collect clues all the time, whether they are reading mysteries or other kinds of books. When we collect information about characters of all sorts, we are building theories about them as we read. Tell the students that during their independent reading time, they will be trying this out. Ask them to choose a character in the book they are reading and keep a written list of clues that help develop a picture of who that character is.

If your class does not do a reading workshop,



you can present this lesson in the context of the work they are doing as individual readers.

Reading Time:

While your students are reading, confer with them about the theories they are building about characters based on the clues they collect from the book. You might ask, “So what kind of a person is _____? What in the book makes you think that?”

Share:

Ask a student to share the way he or she collected “clues” from the text in order to build a theory about a character.

Adapting This Lesson for

Use with Less Experienced Readers:

- Present this lesson as a read-aloud rather than a reading workshop lesson. That way you can support the students' discussion. Instead of asking them to go off and do the same kind of work in their own books, focus on *The Stranger*. Ask the children to spend time talking to each other about the stranger's identity. Keep referring their attention back to the clues they have collected, since younger children tend to build theories that are less focused on text evidence.

Expanding This Lesson:

- Have the children make charts that describe their theories about the stranger and that list text evidence or clues that helped them build these theories.
- The stranger is not a normal human—if he is human at all. Challenge your students to create a character that has human traits, as the stranger does, but is in some way magical as well.

Just for Fun

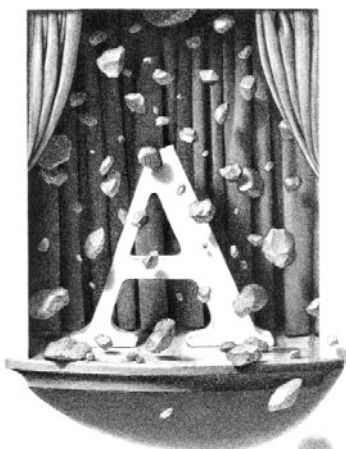
- Make your own story about how the seasons change; create an unusual explanation for a natural process.
- What would happen if the seasons didn't change when they were supposed to? Write a story about the trouble this could cause.
- The stranger was very different from the Baileys, yet they took him in and cared for him. This doesn't always happen. Write about why it is important to be kind to people who are different from us. Use *The Stranger* to support your ideas.



The Stranger
Horn Book Fanfare Selection
New York Times Best Illustrated
Children's Book of the Year

“How marvelous that this master painter and storyteller has added a new dimension to his consistently original and enchanting body of work.”—*New York Times Book Review*

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO
THE Z WAS ZAPPED



by
CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Book Summary

The Z Was Zapped is a delightful alphabet book set up as a play in twenty-six acts performed by the brave and self-sacrificing “Caslon Players.” One by one in alphabetical order, each letter appears on the stage experiencing some sort of predicament. The A, for example, stands up in the midst of a rain of falling rocks. As we turn the page, we read, “The A was in an Avalanche.” Then we see the B, missing its top half, with the gigantic mouth of a hungry dog hovering overhead. We must turn the page, however, before we can read, “The B was badly Bitten.” On through the alphabet we go, watching the letters suffer alliterative mishaps and surprising situations—all the way to the zapping of the Z. Each page gives us the fun of guessing what words will describe the picture we have just seen.

Special Features

This is a dramatic and highly engaging alphabet book that lures children to investigate the relationships among letters, letter sounds, and words—almost in spite of themselves. The letters are bitten, cut, flattened, nailed, uprooted, and tortured in many other gruesome and amusing ways—and as they are, readers cannot help but want to guess what words will describe these experiences. Van Allsburg’s pencil drawings imbue each letter, or actor, with personality and pluck. Never has an evaporating E looked so mysterious. Never has an I been so artfully iced! The concept of this book is brilliantly simple—as many of the best ideas are—and will prove an exciting read for even the most disinterested-seeming young learner.

Find Fritz:

Fritz can only be the dog who badly bites the B!



Summary of Teaching Ideas

There is a wealth of teaching opportunities in this simple and ingenious alphabet book. One idea is to discuss this book in the context of an alphabet book study in which children are asked to examine the different ways that alphabet books can be put together. Some alphabet books are

organized by concept, as is *The Z Was Zapped*. Some are organized by theme—for example, alphabet books using animals or different types of fish, or flowers, or sports. You can ask your students to create their own alphabet books, either individually or in groups or partnerships. This can be a wonderful activity to do with “buddies” across grade levels. It is good for children of all ages, as the concept of the book can be made simpler or more complex depending on your students’ level of experience as readers and writers. Children will be delighted if you can display their work in your school or community as well.

Of course, *The Z Was Zapped* provides wonderful word-work opportunities as well. Younger children will benefit from an exploration of letter identification and letter-sound correspondence. More experienced readers and writers will benefit from an exploration of alliteration—both in writing and in reading. Children of all ages and abilities will benefit from a discussion of how we can use the pictures and what we know of letter sounds to predict what the words will be on the following page.

Guiding Questions for *The Z Was Zapped* Read-Aloud

- What do you notice about how this book works? How is it similar to or different from other alphabet books you know?
- Can you think of some ways to describe what is happening in the picture using other words? Try to use alliteration if you can.
- Using the pictures and what you know of how the book is put together, try to guess how each letter will be described on the following page.

Make Your Own Alliterative Alphabet Book *An upper-grade writing lesson*

What You’ll Need:

- A copy of *The Z Was Zapped*
- A stapled booklet of twenty-six sheets of paper (plus front and back covers) for each student
- Pencils, markers, and crayons for the students

Background Knowledge:

This lesson works well whether the students have been exposed to the book *The Z Was Zapped* already or not. You may or may not have already discussed the concept of alliteration with your students.

Introduction:

Tell your students that you are going to study the way Chris Van Allsburg has put together his alphabet book *The Z Was Zapped* and then they are each going to have a chance to create their own alphabet book using some ideas they have learned from Mr. Van Allsburg.

Teaching:

Read through the book, asking your students to pay attention to the way Van Allsburg uses alliteration in his text. You may want to stop on several pages and have students “turn and talk” to a partner about some other words they know that begin with that letter. While this may sound like a simple thing to ask upper-grade students to do, it gets them warmed up to be thinking alliteratively. Ask them to notice how in Mr. Van Allsburg’s book, the letters are experiencing catastrophes on each page. Tell them that they will be making their own alphabet books using alliteration like Van Allsburg does, but that they will be able to decide for themselves how that will work. Some students might want to structure their books the same way Van Allsburg structured *The Z Was Zapped* and have something happen to a letter on each page: The A was Awfully Ache-y, for example. Some students may want nice things to happen to the letters: The A Ate an Awesome Apple pie. Some students may want to create other situations for their characters. Challenge them to use as many alliterative words as they can in each sentence.

They may choose to do all of the text first and then go back and illustrate, or they may go page by page. It will take more than one class period to finish this activity.

Writing Time:

Confer with students as they work. Encourage them to stretch their thinking and include as many alliterative words as possible in their sentences.

Share:

You may want to sit in a circle and have each student share the page of which he or she is proudest.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Writers:

- Have younger students “buddy up” with older students and work collaboratively on the book.
- Have younger students simply write a word and draw a picture to go along with it for each letter of the alphabet.

Expanding This Lesson:

- You will need to take several more class periods to finish these books. Each day, focus on alliteration and how students could add more to their sentences.
- Take the books to a lower-grade classroom and have your students read them with younger buddies.

Strong Readers Use the First Letter to Help Them

A lower-grade reading lesson

What You’ll Need:

- A copy of *The Z Was Zapped*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector labeled “Reading Strategies for Strong Readers”
- Markers/overhead pens
- Books for the students to read on their own

**Background Knowledge:**

Readers need not be familiar with the book *The Z Was Zapped* before this lesson is presented. It is helpful, however, if your students are beginning to independently read leveled books from your classroom library. An understanding (even a rudimentary one) of letter-sound correspondence is important as well.

Introduction:

Tell your young students that strong readers often look at the first letter of a word to help them when they are trying to read the

word. Tell them that you are going to be showing them how to do this with the book *The Z Was Zapped*, and that then they will have a chance to try this out in their independent reading. Direct their attention to the chart you have started that is labeled “Reading Strategies for Strong Readers.” Before you start reading, write as the first item on the chart, “Strong readers use the first letter of a word to help them.” (Note: You may have already discussed how strong readers use the pictures to help them, so that may be the first item on the chart.)

Teaching:

Tell students that *The Z Was Zapped* is a great book for practicing using the first letter to get ready to read a word because it is an alphabet book that can remind them as they go how each letter sounds. Tell them to watch what you do as you try to read some of the words in the book.

Model using the first letter as you read. For example, with “The *b* was badly Bitten,” exaggerate the shape and sound your mouth makes when you get to the *b* words. Think out loud, “Oh, I can use the picture and the first letter to get this word—b-, b-, badly.”

Ask students to “turn and talk” about what they saw you do. Have them share some ideas with the whole class.

Reading Time:

During independent reading time, ask your students to try this out with their own books. Tell them that when they come to a word they don’t know, they can use the first letter of the word to help them. Confer with them individually during this time.

Share:

Have a student who successfully read a tricky word using this strategy share his or her work with the rest of the class.



Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Readers:

This lesson is specifically designed for emergent readers. It doesn't translate well into upper-grade reading situations. You can teach *other* strategies for reading tricky words if you are working with older students: use the context clues, read all the way through the word, etc.

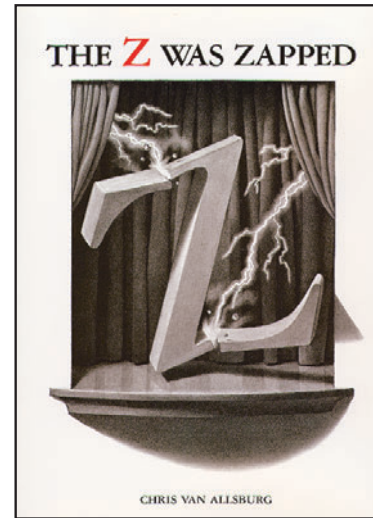
Expanding This Lesson:

Continue teaching reading strategies though modeling with *The Z Was Zapped*. Teach how strong readers read the end of the word as well as the beginning. Teach how strong readers get their mouths ready to say the word. Teach how strong readers ask themselves, "Does that sound right? Does that make sense?"

Just for Fun

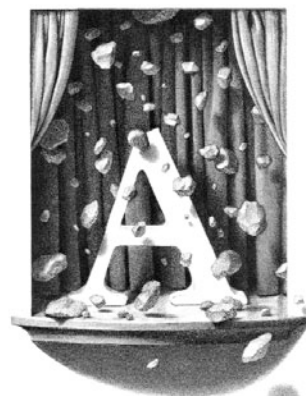
Suggest these activities to your students:

- As a class, act out *The Z Was Zapped*. Ask each of your students to portray one of the letters. You can be the narrator. Make a simple stage. Invite community members.
- Make an alphabet mural in a long hallway. Ask your students to write words they know that start with each letter on a piece of paper with that letter on it. Invite other children and community members to add to the mural as they walk by.
- In this book, the letters experience catastrophes. Using Van Allsburg's concept of the letters as actors, write an alphabet of your own that focuses on what the letters can do: "The Z plays the Zither," for example.

**The Z Was Zapped**

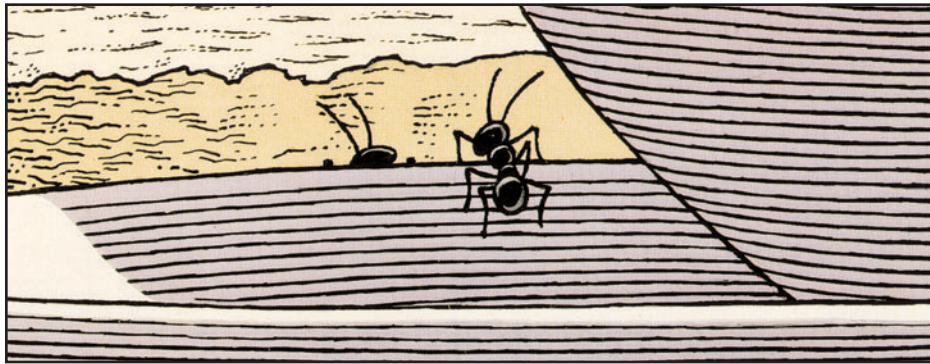
ALA Notable Book for Children
Booklist Editors' Choice

A dramatic black-and-white presentation of the alphabet in which the three-time Caldecott medalist depicts a mysterious transformation of each letter.



TWO BAD ANTS

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Plot Summary

When an ant scout returns home with a mysterious crystal, the queen ant decides it is the most delicious food she has ever tasted. That evening the other ants, wishing to make the queen happy, set off on a journey to fetch home as many of these crystals as they can carry. The journey is a dangerous one. Following the scout, the ants travel through the “forest” to the “mountain” they must climb in order to reach the treasure they seek. In the perilous and confounding world of the human kitchen, the ants find the bowl of delicious crystals. Hurrying home, they fail to notice that two small ants have stayed behind. The two ants have decided to tarry and eat crystals to their hearts’ content. When morning comes, the ants are violently awoken by a large scoop lifting them out of the crystal jar and dropping them into a hot brown liquid. They manage one narrow escape after another until finally they decide to choose one last crystal each and leave this strange and frightening place. Lugging the crystals back home, they are glad to be doing the right thing and returning to their family.

Special Features

The spare illustrations in *Two Bad Ants*—drawn with pen and ink over a base of casein, a non-water-soluble paint—differ perceptibly from Van Allsburg’s other drawings but are equally expressive. In this book perhaps more than others Van Allsburg’s stories we observe the world from unusual angles and perspectives. As we follow the ants on their journey to the pot of delicious crystals, the ordinary becomes extraordinary and powerful. A simple kitchen becomes a perilous obstacle course. We are invited to try on the size of an ant—electric sockets loom overhead, a spoon is as big as an elevator. The adventure is described in fresh language that transforms a simple walk from the yard to the kitchen (in human terms) into a life-threatening excursion.

As in many of Van Allsburg’s books, the characters develop and change by passing through a dangerous or challenging experience unscathed. Once again we are encouraged to celebrate and honor the comforts of a simple life. The “two bad ants” are reminded that working together for the benefit of the whole community—something that is true to the nature of an ant—feels better than selfishly lingering in the sugar bowl to eat a great share of the delicious crystals. After their frightening experiences in the kitchen, they are relieved and delighted to head home to the calm and collaborative world of their home and family.

Find Fritz:

Fritz the dog is hidden inside the swirl of water with the ants. He’s at the bottom left corner of page 27.



Teaching Ideas

To reach their prizes, the ants traverse what to them is a mysterious land full of menacing obstacles. To us, it’s an ordinary kitchen—but Van Allsburg doesn’t tell us that directly. He describes the setting without telling us it’s a kitchen. A useful exercise is to have children describe a familiar setting without naming it. Encourage them to give as many details as possible so that other students can guess the location. For example, instead of saying “the ants walked through the grass,” Van Allsburg writes:

Dew formed on the leaves above. Without warning, huge cold drops fell on the marching ants. A firefly passed overhead that, for an instant, lit up the woods with a blinding flash of blue-green light.

Instead of saying “the ants were in the toaster,” he writes:

When the ants climbed out of the holes they were surrounded by a strange red glow. It seemed to them that every second the temperature was rising. It soon became so unbearably hot that they thought they would soon be cooked.

These excerpts and many others in *Two Bad Ants* demonstrate descriptive writing that shows rather than tells. Reviewing such excerpts can be useful during reading lessons to students when they undertake an examination of setting or description. How does a particular description affect the story? If the description were left out what would be the result? This technique of querying is useful in writing lessons as well.

Two Bad Ants provides opportunities for less experienced readers to develop their predicting skills—either during a read-aloud or as part of their independent reading.

Guiding Questions for a *Two Bad Ants* Read-Aloud

- Why does the queen ant want the crystals? Why do all the other ants feel happy to go on a dangerous journey to fetch them [for her?]
- Why do the two bad ants decide not to return home with the other ants?
- Do you think the two ants regret their decision to stay in the land of the crystals? Why or why not?
- The two bad ants finally decide to go back home to their family of ants. What prompts their decision? What matters to them about their home community? What matters to you about your home community?



TWO BAD ANTS

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG

switch descriptions with a partner and try to guess what place their partner has described.

Writing Time:

As your students write individually, confer with them about showing the setting rather than telling what it is. When each student has written a description of a setting, organize the class into writing partnerships and ask students to read their descriptions aloud and guess where their partner's setting is. If time permits, they may be able to share with more than one person.

Share:

Share the work of a student or two who have written vivid descriptions of a setting.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Writers:

- Instead of asking your students to try this technique in their own writing, spend more time with *Two Bad Ants*. Rather than ask them to guess about only one or two settings, spend most of your time covering the pictures and asking them to guess where the ants are, and then show them the pictures.
 - Give your students photographs of a location—a kitchen, a park, etc. Ask them to refer to the photos when they write about the setting to help them fill their text with details. It can be fun to have students read their description to a partner without showing the photo, and then to ask the partner to say as much as he or she can about the setting that was just described.
- ### Expanding This Lesson:
- The idea of “show, not tell” can be used in many different writing situations. It is a good technique to teach during your students’ revision process. It can be helpful if you have the class go back to a piece they have been working on. Ask them to underline sentences or passages that tell rather than show the reader. Then ask them to revise their work by describing something the reader can actually see. For example, a child who might have written “I felt great” can be encouraged to show readers that she felt great rather than coming out and saying so: “I grinned and laughed as I rolled off the raft into the cool green lake.”
 - Have your students think of an emotion and a time during which they felt that emotion. Instead of writing “I was happy,” ask your students to show that they were happy without saying so. Ask them to read their writing aloud so that the community can guess which emotion they were describing.

Mystery Setting: Teaching Students to Show (Not Tell) When Describing Setting

An upper-grade writing lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Two Bad Ants*
- Writing paper and pencils for the students

Background Knowledge:

This lesson works best if your students are not yet familiar with *Two Bad Ants*. It can be helpful if students have been working on narrative writing of some sort and have been exposed to the idea of writing about setting, but it is not necessary.

Introduction:

Tell your students that you are going to read the book *Two Bad Ants* to them. Ask them to pay particular attention to the way Van Allsburg shows us where the ants are by describing the setting in vivid detail, rather than saying where they are.

Teaching:

Choose several pages to read to the children without showing them the pictures. For example:

They found a huge round disk with holes that could neatly hide them. But as soon as they had climbed inside, their hiding place was lifted, tilted, and lowered into a dark space. When the ants climbed out of the holes they were surrounded by a strange red glow. It seemed to them that every second the temperature was rising. It soon became so unbearably hot they thought they would soon be cooked.

Read the text to the children and then ask them to guess where the ants are. After they guess, emphasize that Van Allsburg doesn't just come out and say, “The ants went into the toaster,” but shows us where they are by describing the setting in detail. You may want to choose more than one place to stop and read a setting description without showing children the pictures, as they will probably enjoy it!

Tell your students that their job during writing time will be to choose a setting that is familiar to them and describe it by showing it in detail instead of simply telling where it is. Then have them

Making Predictions As We Read

A lower-grade reading lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Two Bad Ants*
- Books that your students can read independently

Background Knowledge:

This lesson is designed to fit into a reading workshop in which students are either using familiar picture books to retell stories or are reading from leveled books matched to their abilities. The lesson can be used within the context of a class reader as well. You may already have read *Two Bad Ants* aloud to your students and

discussed the concept of predicting what will happen next based on information supplied by the pictures and the text. This lesson will help children transfer the concept of making predictions from a story that is read aloud to them into the context of their own independent reading.

Introduction:

Tell your students that you will be showing them how readers stop and make predictions as they go, using both the pictures and the text. You will be modeling this concept for your students using *Two Bad Ants*, and then they will get to try it out in the books they are reading themselves before they go off and read independently. It can be helpful if you ask your students to sit on their books or put them behind their backs so they are not distracted as you teach. Tell them to pay very close attention to what you do as you read, stop, make a prediction, and go on.

Teaching:

Tell the children that every so often readers stop and make a prediction, or guess what is going to happen next. Tell them to watch you as you show them how this is done, using *Two Bad Ants*. Remind them quickly of how the two ants decide to stay in bowl of crystals, and then read the following excerpt (pp. 16–17):

Daylight came. The sleeping ants were unaware of changes taking place in their new found home. A giant silver scoop hovered above them, then plunged deep into the crystals. It shoveled up both ants and crystals and carried them high into the air.

The ants were wide awake when the scoop turned, dropping them from a frightening height. They tumbled through space in a shower of crystals and fell into a boiling brown lake.

Think aloud for your students as you make a prediction. You might say, “I think the ants might have fallen into a cup of coffee when they got scooped out of the sugar bowl. This is why: I read in the text that a silver scoop shoveled them up. I think that’s a spoon. Then I read that the ants fell into a boiling brown lake. I think that must be coffee. The pictures make me think that also—the big silver object does look like a spoon.”

Ask the students to get out their own books and read for a couple of minutes. Tell them you will be stopping them and asking them to make a prediction to their talk partners. Do this. As they talk to each other, remind them to use both the pictures and the words to help them. Bring the class back together and ask a child or two to share their predictions in their own books with the class.

Tell the students as you send them off to read independently that whenever they are reading, their job is to stop every so often and make a prediction about what is going to happen next, using both pictures and text.

Reading Time:



As your students read, confer with them individually about the process of making predictions, “just like we did using *Two Bad Ants*.” Stop the class midway through reading time and ask them to tell their reading partners what they predict will happen next.

Share:

Share the work of a student or partnership that made predictions in their books based on information given by the pictures and the text.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Readers:

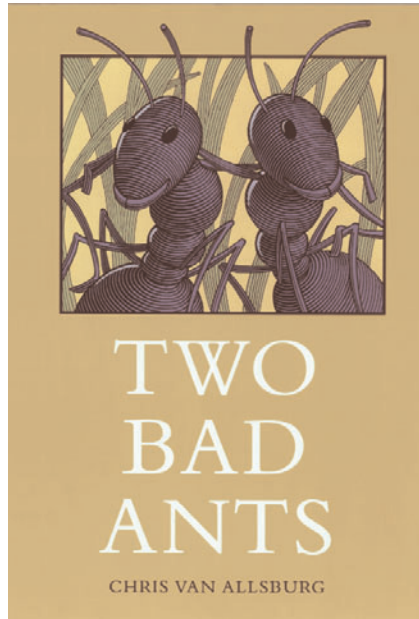
- If your students are not yet reading and are still working with emergent storytelling in familiar picture books, simply tell them that readers make predictions about what will happen next using the pictures and what they know about the story.
- You may want to spend several more read-aloud sessions working on predictions as a class instead of immediately transferring this work into children’s independent reading.

Expanding This Lesson:

- Expand on the predicting work that can be done within reading partnerships. Focus on helping students to stop and take turns telling each other the predictions they are making within their own books. Teach them to ask each other questions about what they are reading.
- Try reading the story to your students without showing them the pictures at all. Stop and have them predict where the ants are simply by listening to the words. Remind them how writers like Chris Van Allsburg put lots of detail into their descriptions.

Just for Fun:

- Imagine you are ant-sized. What obstacles might you encounter walking around in your own home/school/garden/street? Write about it!
- Have you ever been “bad” like the ants? What happened? Write about it!
- Write the continuing adventures of the two bad ants. What would happen if they came to school with you?
- Write about a part your classroom from an ant’s perspective. Read what you wrote to your classmates and ask them to guess what you have described. The more specific you are, the easier it will be to guess correctly!



Two Bad Ants (1988)

- **IRA/CBC Children's Choice**

"Children will be fascinated by the ant-eye view that Van Allsburg provides of common everyday items." — *Booklist*

JUST A DREAM

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Plot Summary

Young Walter is a careless boy who tosses rubbish on the grass, thinks recycling is a waste of time, and mocks his neighbor, Rose, for her delight in the tree she has just received for her birthday. Walter longs to live in the future, which he imagines to be full of robots, tiny personal planes, and machines that make life easier. One night when he falls asleep, his wish to live in the future comes true. However, his dreams carry him into a future not filled with the robots and machines he believes will make life better, but instead ravaged by the careless mistakes of the past. Walter travels in his sleep to the midst of an endless garbage dump situated on his own street, to a tree in a forest that is about to be cut down, to the top of a smokestack belching pollution, to the middle of a fishless sea, and to other places that show him possible negative versions of the future. When he wakes up, he is a changed boy. On his birthday, he asks for a tree, which is planted near Rose's birthday tree. When he falls asleep that night, he dreams of the future again. In this dream, he is shown a different version—instead of a world of robots and machines, laundry hangs on the line, a man mows his lawn with a motorless mower, and Walter is delighted to see that the two little trees have grown tall and strong in the clean air.

Special Features

Just a Dream can form an engaging component of an environmental study as well the basis for language arts lessons. The strong environmental message of the book is clear, but as in Van Allsburg's other work, the book focuses on characters' developing sense of personal responsibility. We are reminded that simple is not always worse; instead, it may be much healthier and more sustainable.

As in other Van Allsburg books, we are invited to explore the meeting point of dreams and reality. In this book, the world of young Walter's dreams has a substantial effect on his waking life. Walter experiences a dramatic change of heart as a result of the events he witnesses in his dream. Van Allsburg's characters often change as a consequence of their interaction with events in the story. He develops his characters through their actions rather than by telling readers directly what the characters are about. What Walter does tells us about the kind of boy he is.

Van Allsburg is also skilled at focusing in on one small moment and describing it in detail. This approach is difficult to achieve for

many young writers who tend toward abstraction. It can be helpful to use Van Allsburg's description of one moment to talk about focus with your students. For example:

He bought one large jelly-filled doughnut. He took the pastry from its bag, eating quickly as he walked along. He licked the red jelly from his fingers. Then he crumpled up the empty bag and threw it at a fire hydrant.

This passage tells readers a great deal about Walter's character by focusing in on one instant in his life.

Van Allsburg's artwork contributes largely, as usual, to the magic of the story. Using color pastels and composing from shifting perspectives and angles, he invites us to watch sometimes from within the scene and sometimes from above. His pictures help us focus in on one moment by zooming in on a detail or framing the view in an unusual way—for example, we focus on smokestacks from the top and close up.

Find Fritz:

Fritz the dog is hidden cleverly as a tiny hood ornament on the semi truck aiming for Walter's bed.

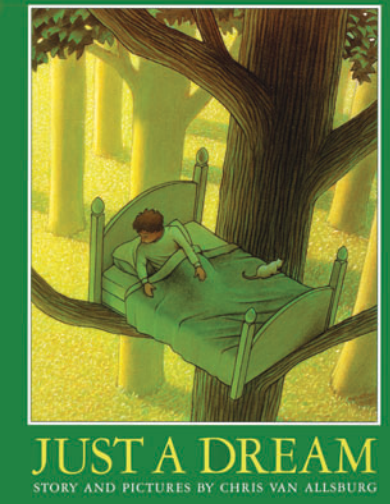


Teaching Ideas

Because Walter undergoes a transformation over the course of the story, *Just a Dream* provides wonderful teaching material for examining how story elements (characters, plot, and setting) combine to facilitate change. These types of reading lessons are better suited to children who have had some exposure to the story elements (as early as first grade). Children can be encouraged—either in the context of a class conversation or within their individual reading work—to not only notice and articulate Walter's changing perspective, and to look for evidence in the text that points to the change in his outlook.

Young writers often have a difficult time with focus in their stories, whether they are fictional or realistic narratives. *Just a Dream*

offers several teaching points for how the author zooms in on single, telling moment. Using the excerpt above (or others) can be helpful in teaching children how to focus in their own writing. You can also explain that Walter's character is exposed not because the author tells us directly that Walter is a careless boy who doesn't think about the effects of his actions, but because he describes in great detail what Walter does. This may help your students learn that creating realistic characters often includes describing their actions and how they move through the world.



Guiding Questions for a *Just a Dream* Read-Aloud

- What do you think of the way Walter tosses his wrappers on the ground and makes fun of Rose's tree? What do these behaviors tell us about Walter's character?
- At the beginning of the story, Walter thinks that life will be much easier in the future, with robots and machines to help us do everything. Do you agree or disagree? Why? What do *you* think the future will be like?
- *As you read the story to your students, pause at several scenes in Walter's dream journey and discuss the issues described. For example:* Why do you think there are no more fish in the sea in Walter's dream? What can be done about the problem of reduced fish stock in the world's oceans?
- Walter's ideas change drastically over the course of the story. What does he learn from his dream?
- Have you had an experience that changed your mind about something?
- What does Chris Van Allsburg teach readers about caring for the Earth?

Zoom In on One Little Moment and Write About That

A lower-grade writing lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Just a Dream*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector
- Markers/overhead pens
- Writing paper and pencils for the students

Background Knowledge:

The children should have experienced *Just a Dream* as a read-aloud before you teach this lesson so that they are familiar with the storyline. The lesson is designed for use within the context of a writing workshop, but can be presented independently as well. The lesson works best if your students have been studying personal narrative, fiction, or other types of narrative writing. It will be helpful, although not necessary, to have already spoken to your students

about the importance of focusing their writing to create more powerful stories.

Introduction:

Tell your students that one way writers make their stories powerful and interesting is to zoom in on one little moment in time and describe it in detail. When we focus in on one moment, our writing becomes more authentic because we are able to portray in detail what happened. Describing one small moment in the life of a character can also reveal a great deal about the character's personality.

Teaching:

Van Allsburg does a wonderful job describing Walter in *Just a Dream* by focusing in on one small moment when he is walking home from school. Instead of saying very little about a series of activities spread out over time, Van Allsburg zooms in on just a few minutes of activity. As a result, we start to build ideas about who Walter is. Read the following excerpt to your students:

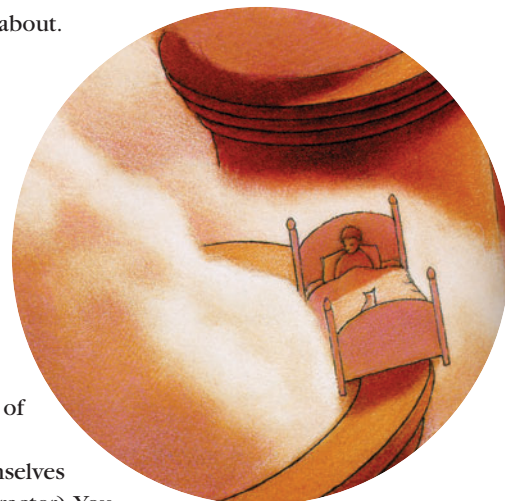
He bought one large jelly-filled doughnut. He took the pastry from its bag, eating quickly as he walked along. He licked the red jelly from his fingers. Then he crumpled up the empty bag and threw it at a fire hydrant.

Ask the children to turn and talk to someone near them (or to their talk partner, if they are organized into talk partnerships) about what they know about Walter after you read the excerpt. They will probably refer to his being messy or careless, and indifferent to the environment. Tell them that Van Allsburg doesn't come right out and say these things; instead, he focuses on one moment in Walter's life and we see for ourselves.

Tell your students to think of a character that they have been working on in writing workshop lately—either themselves or an invented character. Ask them to take a couple of minutes to think about one moment in the character's life that shows a lot about his or her personality. This is easier for most young writers in the context of personal narrative because they can employ their memories in addition to their imaginations. Ask them to turn and talk to a neighbor about the moment that they plan to write about.

Writing Time:

If your writers are working within the context of a writing workshop, confer with them as they write, urging them to focus in on one small moment in the life of their character (whether it is themselves or an invented character). You may want to carry a copy of *Just a*



Dream around with you as you confer so that you can refer to the passage about Walter and the jelly doughnut as you talk with each child. If students have trouble focusing on one moment you can help them to look closer.

If your students are not working within a writing workshop model, you will want to give them more structure before they leave the rug—for example, ask them to think of an environmental issue that they care strongly about and to write about it in story form.

Share:

It can be very useful for children to see how their own thinking can be revised as they write. One way of exploring the work that children have done during writing time is to share the work of a student who started out writing in a vague, unfocused way about a character and then focused in on one little moment as you and the student conferred, Discuss with the community which piece of writing is more powerful. Almost without fail, the focused piece will be more compelling. It is helpful for children to have the unfocused and the focused writing displayed next to each other so that they can compare the results on their own.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Writers:

- More experienced writers might be challenged to create an entire story that takes place in one moment. They can be asked to use their senses to record all that they can remember or imagine about that moment, and then to shape the moment into narrative form.
- Ask your students to find examples in their reading of places where the author has zoomed in on one moment in time. Ask the to discuss how this approach gives readers a clearer sense of characters' personalities.

Expanding this lesson:

- Write a story about an experience your class has shared together. Ask each child to write about one small moment they remember from that experience. Combine the moments to form a story to be displayed in the classroom.
- Repeat this lesson but tell your students that focusing on one moment is like using the zoom lens of a camera, or the focus dial of binoculars, to make a story clearer. You may want to bring a camera or a pair of binoculars to class and ask students to notice how much more they see and understand about a thing or person being focused on when the binoculars are in focus or when the camera zooms in. You can also take pictures that show a scene or an object from close up and far away and ask your students to discuss how much more detail they see in the picture taken close up.

How Do Characters Change Through Interaction



with Story Elements?
An upper-grade reading lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Just a Dream*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector
- Markers/overhead pens
- Paper, pencils, and books for students to read on their own

Background Knowledge:

It will be helpful if you have been studying the story elements in your classroom reading work lately so that

this information is fresh in your students' minds. The story elements you will want to focus on are setting, plot, characters, and movement through time. While it is also helpful if students are familiar with the book *Just a Dream*, you can present the lesson right after reading the book to your students for the first time, if you wish.

Introduction:

First discuss with your students how Walter changes during the course of the story. Write some of the ways in which Walter changes on a piece of chart paper or on an overhead. Children will be likely to notice first that his ideas about the environment change. They may also notice that he becomes more responsible in terms of doing his chores and more thoughtful toward Rose about her tree; instead of mocking her, he decides he wants a tree of his own.

Refer to this list as you continue your lesson. Tell the children that when authors write stories, they usually make sure their characters change in some way. Explain that characters usually change in direct relation to the story elements. Tell the students that they will be looking first at how Walter changes within the ongoing context of the setting, plot, and other characters in the book. Next the students will examine character change in the context of their own independent reading work.

Teaching:

Discuss with your students how Walter changes in Van Allsburg's *Just a Dream*. Start by examining his interaction with the setting. On chart paper, write "Setting" and then discuss how Walter's interaction with the places he journeys to in his dreams shows him possible versions of the future, teaching him the importance of being thoughtful in the present. Children will be likely to recall details of the places Walter visits because of Van Allsburg's vivid artwork and descriptive prose. Label a second column on your chart paper "Plot" and ask your students to discuss the events in the storyline that change Walter's mind. Label a third column "Characters" and have the same kind of conversation. Before you send your students off to read on their own, tell them that they can carry on this kind of examination as they do their own independent reading. They can even write notes to themselves resembling the notes you took on chart paper.

Reading Time:

During reading time, confer with individual students about changes

in the characters they are reading about. Ask your students to think not only about how these characters are changing, but how their interaction with the story elements brings about the change. This is an important activity not only for making meaning out of books, but also for constructing and writing about characters in the stories your students are creating themselves.

Share:

Invite one or two students to discuss with the class how their characters have changed and how their interactions with the story elements brought about these changes.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Younger Writers:

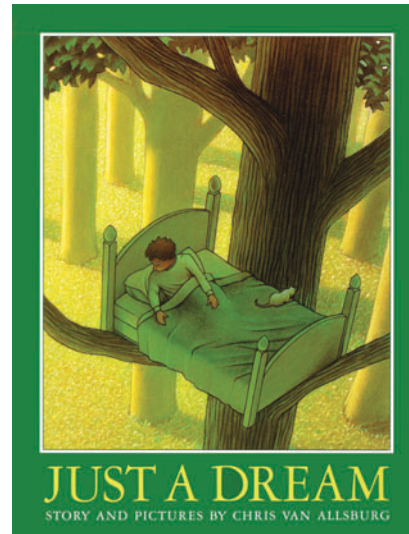
- Focus only on Walter's change. Talk about how characters often change over the course of a story. Ask the students to identify how Walter changes and to point out text evidence that supports their ideas.
- Focus only on *identifying* the story elements in *Just a Dream*. Make a list of the characters' names, the different settings, and a timeline to describe the plot.

Expanding This Lesson:

- Ask the children to design charts that show what they have learned about their characters' (or Walter's) change through interacting with the story elements. Hang these charts up in your room!
- Ask the students to write a character description of Walter at the beginning of the story and then another character description of him at the end of the story. How did Walter change?

Just for Fun

- Describe a transformational experience in which your own thinking was changed.
- Write about an environmental issue you care deeply about, in story form.
- Make posters for your school or community that teach others about the effects of their actions on the environment.
- Plant a class tree.



Just A Dream

“Van Allsburg reaches a new pinnacle of excellence in both illustration and storytelling . . . His fable builds to an urgent plea for action as it sends a rousing message of hope.”

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO
THE WRETCHED STONE

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Book Summary

The *Wretched Stone* begins with a notice reading: “Excerpts from the log of the Rita Ann. Randall Ethan Hope, Captain.” We read, then, the captain’s record of an extraordinary journey. The captain writes about loading supplies onto the ship at the start of the voyage, and the fine crew that has been assembled by first mate Mr. Howard. He notes that many of the men are avid readers, musicians, and storytellers, and as the voyage is under way, they are able to entertain themselves wonderfully.

The captain records the sighting of an uncharted island and decides to disembark with his crew to look for fruit and fresh water. Then he records their sojourn into the island’s interior. He describes lush vegetation that bears no fruit, bitter water, and an overpowering sickly sweet smell. He also describes an object the crew found and brought aboard: a gray rock with one smooth and glowing surface. As the crew sets sail again, the captain describes their fascination with the stone. All they seem to do is sit and stare into it. Soon the captain notes that something is wrong with the crew—they do not speak or play their instruments anymore. He believes they may have contracted some sort of fever from the stone, and he plans to throw it overboard. The next day he wakes to find that the crewmembers have locked themselves into the hold with the stone. A storm approaches, and the captain is fearful—how will he sail the ship alone? He pounds on the door of the hold until finally it swings open. He is horrified to find that each member of his crew has turned into an ape.

The next entry records that the storm has passed, though both masts and the ship’s rudder are lost. The mysterious stone has gone dark. The men are still apes. As the boat drifts and waits for rescue, the captain discovers that playing the violin and reading to the crew has a positive effect. Discovering that the stone has begun to glow again, he covers it up. He soon reports that the men have returned to normal; those among them who knew how to read return most quickly to their natural forms.

The final entries record that the captain and crew have been rescued. The captain decides to burn the boat and sink it and the stone to the bottom of the sea and not to talk about the strange events with anyone. The crew, he reports, is back to normal—except for one thing: an unnatural appetite for bananas.

Special Features

Children will quickly notice *The Wretched Stone*’s unusual structure. Instead of being written like a traditional narrative, the story is

laid out in the form of entries into the captain’s logbook. Readers experience the drama of the crew’s transformation through the confused and terrified eyes of the captain himself. It is fun to look at how Chris Van Allsburg dates the captain’s entries and how the tone of the entries changes to reflect the captain’s changing circumstances and mood as the stone begins to affect the crew.

The content of the story is unusual, as well. We are never told what the stone is, how it came to be, or why it has such an extraordinary power over those who spend time with it. “Why monkeys?” we ask ourselves. Why is it that crewmembers that know how to read are more quickly transformed back into humans? The stone could be a metaphor for *television* in many ways—a glowing object that draws humans to stare at it for hours at a time and shuts down (or just doesn’t make use of) creative parts of the brain:

It is a rock, approximately two feet across. It is roughly textured, gray in color, but a portion of it is flat and smooth as glass. From this surface comes a glowing light that is quite beautiful and pleasing to look at.

The crewmembers first stop reading, playing music, dancing, and working, and then finally become monkeys that simply gather around the stone and stare. The eerie light reflects off the blank faces of the monkeys like the flickering light from a television. When the stone is destroyed, the crewmembers slowly come back to their senses—those who can read are perhaps more able to quickly begin flexing the creative muscles of their mind again, and thus return to their original form. Whether the stone is an exact metaphor for television or simply invented to describe how people can be lured away from the creative activities that bring joy and energy to life, *The Wretched Stone* provides an excellent forum for discussing these ideas with young people.

Find Fritz

Fritz appears as just a tail near the leg of a sailor-turned-ape in the hold of the ship.



Summary of Teaching Ideas

The unusual structure of the book provides a wonderful opportunity to teach young writers about how a story can be told through letters, journal entries, or, as is the case in *The Wretched Stone*, entries in a logbook. If you are studying historical fiction in writing workshop, or if you are studying any historical period in social studies, you can use this book as a model for children who are writing historical journal entries (for example, children studying the American pioneers' westward journey on the Oregon Trail might write a series of journal entries describing the trip). Writing in journal or letterform gives us an unusual understanding of the character's voice. When we write in the third person, we are often describing our characters from the outside. Writing journal entries immediately helps the writer get into the mind of the character. When we write in letterform, not only are we inside the mind of the character, but we are aiming that character's emotion and thought at another specific character.

Younger children will benefit from examining the book as readers as well—piecing together the information provided by the captain's spare logbook entries will help them understand all of the mind work that readers do on their own—and how exciting it can be to create the world of the book in our minds in order to form opinions and make sense of the story.

Whether you choose to approach the stone as a direct metaphor for television or not, the book can fit beautifully into a discussion about the relative benefits/drawbacks of television and reading.

Guiding Questions for *A Wretched Stone* Read-Aloud

- What do you notice about how the story is being told? What is different about reading journal entries as opposed to hearing the story told in the third person?
- What do you think this stone is? Does the description remind you of anything? Why did the men bring the stone onboard?
- What is happening to the crewmembers? Why aren't they reading or dancing anymore?
- Why have the crewmembers turned into monkeys?
- Why do you think the crewmembers that knew how to read recovered most quickly?

Telling a Historical Story Through Journal Entries

An upper grade writing lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Wretched Stone*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector
- Markers/overhead pens
- Writing paper and pencils/pens for each student

The Wretched Stone



WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG

Background Knowledge:

This lesson assumes that your class is in the midst of a social studies investigation focusing around some historical period. You may present the lesson without being engaged in such an investigation, but you will need to provide your students with more support in both choosing a historical period to write about and in learning historical facts to include. You will want to set aside several periods of class time for this project, as telling a story through journal entries necessitates several journal entries, which will take more than one class period to write. Children should be familiar with the book *The Wretched Stone*.

Introduction:

Tell your students as they gather around you in a central meeting area that you will be studying the way Chris Van Allsburg tells a story through journal entries in the

book *The Wretched Stone*, and then trying out the process themselves in the context of whichever historical period your class has been investigating.

Teaching:

Open the book and read the first page. Turning the book to face your students, ask them what they notice about the way the text is arranged on the page. They will likely notice that the entries are dated and that they are relatively brief. You may need to push them to notice that the entries are all in the first person, in the voice of the captain. You may want to point out that a captain on a ship would not be likely to have a lot of time to write, hence the brevity of the entries. You can record what your students notice about the page's organization on a piece of chart paper or an overhead.

As you read through the book, stop occasionally and draw your students' attention to how as the days progress the captain's feelings change because the stone begins to have power over his crew. When telling a story through journal entries, the voice of the narrator often changes as the entries move through time as a result of events described.

Collect a list of all that students notice about the entries. Tell them that when they go off, they will begin a project in which they will be writing several journal entries as though they lived during the historical period that you are studying in social studies. Tell them they will need to imagine themselves in that time period and include things they have learned about the way life was then, as well as including the things they have noticed about structure through studying *The Wretched Stone* (for example, dating the entries).

Writing Time:

Because this is the beginning of a project that will take several days, children may need a bit of extra time to think through how they will begin. As you confer with them individually, you will want to help them follow the structure of journal entries that you have noticed together during the lessons and make sure that they are including historically accurate facts.

Share:

Choose a student or students to share what they have written. Ask the others to pay attention to details that indicate that this story takes place in the past (what historical facts are included?) and is written in journal form.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Writers:

- As is often the case when teaching more sophisticated ideas to less experienced writers, it can be quite helpful to undertake an activity as a whole class as opposed to sending children off to try the activity alone. Younger children will be able to understand the concept of telling a story through letters or journal entries but may find it more difficult to undertake the process by themselves. You may do this as a daily group exercise, eliciting ideas from the children and recording them yourself on chart paper.
- You may simply want to use the book to teach younger writers how to write a dated journal entry. They will be able to try this out on their own.

Expanding This Lesson:

- This lesson is designed to be expanded across several days' worth of class time, as students will need more than one day to write enough entries to be able to tell a story across time. Each day you may want to focus on a different aspect of the process in your lesson—for example, one day you may focus on developing a distinct voice for your character. Another day you may focus on moving through time. Another lesson may focus on how to incorporate historically accurate facts into a fictional journal entry. You will then want to help children continue through the writing process so that they are able to revise and edit what they have written.

Symbolism in The Wretched Stone

A lower grade read-aloud lesson

What You'll Need:

A copy of *The Wretched Stone*

Background Knowledge:

This lesson can be presented as a read-aloud within the context of either a reading or writing workshop, but it can also stand on its own. It is helpful if children are used to being read to and to discussing books as a whole class. You will want to organize your students into talk partnerships so they are able to turn and talk to each other when you ask them questions about the text.

**Introduction:**

Tell your students that you will be reading *The Wretched Stone* out loud to them and talking about how sometimes authors write about one problem in order to help us think about another real-world problem. Tell them that Chris Van Allsburg does this in *The Wretched Stone*. First, ask your students to look at the front cover. What do they notice? What do they think the book might be about?

Reading/Discussion Time:

As you read the book, you will want to stop often to make sure that your students comprehend the basic storyline before you begin discussing the symbolism of the stone. You will want to help them notice the journal entry format of the book, but this is not the focus of the discussion, so don't spend a great deal of time exploring the idea. When you get to the page that contains the following description, stop and ask the children to turn and talk to each other about what familiar object the description reminds them of.

It is a rock, approximately two feet across. It is roughly textured, gray in color, but a portion of it is flat and smooth as glass. From this surface comes a glowing light that is quite beautiful and pleasing to look at.

Have students share their ideas. While it is likely that someone will think of a television, if your students do not, you may help them out.

As you read about the crew's transformation, tell your students that sometimes authors tell one story to represent another story. Ask your students, "How is what is happening to the crew similar to what happens when people watch a lot of television?" This is another good place for them to turn and talk to each other. When students are given time to talk in pairs, every child is given a chance to share his or her thinking. As they talk, you may want to leave your chair and listen in on their conversations. This way, you are able to bring out aspects of the conversation that will be useful to students' comprehension. For example, when you bring the class back together, you may mention, "I heard Talia saying that when people watch TV they just sit there and do nothing so they aren't getting any exercise—just like the crew members who are standing and staring at the stone."

As you read on, another point where you will want to have students turn and talk to each other is when the crew is returning to normal and Van Allsburg writes, "It seems that those who knew how to read recovered most quickly." Ask them why they think this might be so.

You may continue the conversation as long as your students are able to sustain it. At the end, you will want to reinforce that authors sometimes tell one story to help us understand another story or issue—just like Chris Van Allsburg did when he wrote the story of the stone.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Learners:

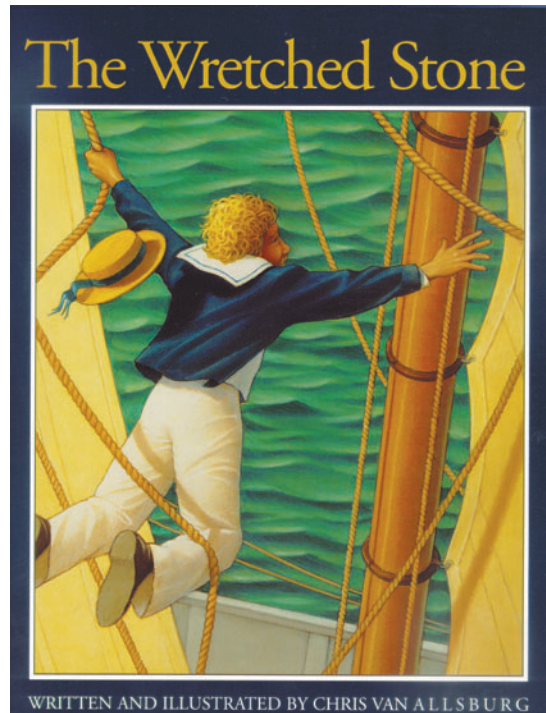
- More experienced writers will benefit from a read-aloud discussion of this book as well—they will simply bring a deeper level of understanding and insight to the discussions and will need less support from you.
- You may want to encourage more sophisticated writers to try explaining a social issue that they are concerned about in story form.

Expanding this lesson:

- Have students write their own feelings about the phenomenon of children watching a lot of television. What are the benefits of television? What are the drawbacks?

Just for Fun:

- Read *The Wretched Stone* in the context of “Turn Off Your TV” week. Have your students think of other things that can be done instead of watching TV and write about them. Post “Turn Off Your TV” signs in the hallways of the school.
- Imagine that you are on a voyage across the sea. Write a log of your adventures like that captain did in *The Wretched Stone*.
- What happens to the stone? Does anybody find it again? Imagine the continuing adventures of the stone.

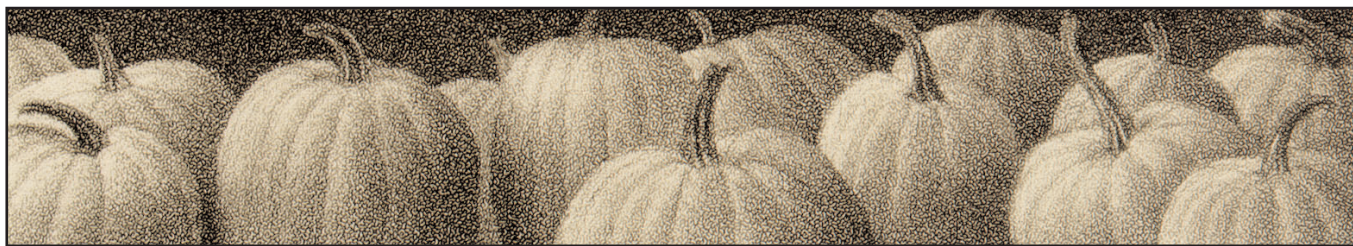
**The Wretched Stone (1991)**• **IRA/CBC Children's Choice**

“As always, Van Allsburg’s paintings are magnificent. Cool, clear colors, boldly executed, and unusual perspective accentuate the story’s mystery.”

— *Booklist*

THE WIDOW'S BROOM

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Plot Summary

One day a witch is flying over widow Minna Shaw's home, her broom loses the power of flight. The witch falls headlong into Minna's garden. When Minna discovers the witch lying there in the morning, she takes her in and puts her to bed. After only one day, the witch is healed. That night as Minna sleeps, the witch departs—leaving behind the broom she thinks is powerless. Minna decides to keep the broom and use it for sweeping the floor. She is astounded one day when the broom begins sweeping the floor on its own! Quickly overcoming her fear, the widow teaches the broom to help her with other tasks. The broom learns how to chop wood, fetch water, and do many other useful jobs. Minna's neighbors, the Spiveys, are not nearly as thrilled with the broom as she is, believing it to be frightening and wicked. One day, two of the Spivey boys taunt and tease the broom as it works. Pushed to its limit, the broom gives the boys a thrashing. The Spiveys arrive at Minna's house determined to take revenge. Minna shows them to the broom closet. They take out the broom they see and burn it. Life soon returns to normal until one day Minna tells the Spiveys she has seen the ghost of the broom! Mr. Spivey sees a white broom that night, circling his house with an ax. The Spivey family moves away, and Minna Shaw is left to live in peace with her broom—not burned after all, simply painted a ghostly white.

Special Features

In *The Widow's Broom*, the text is straightforward and clear, while the pictures are moody and layered with emotion. The drawings' unusual texture was created by using litho pencil, which is very dark pencil, on coquille board. The supernatural is introduced into normal life with Van Allsburg's typical knack for pushing against the boundaries of reality. As readers, we believe as easily in the falling witch and the broom that sweeps by itself as in the kindly Minna Pratt.

While this book provides wonderful Halloween reading, it raises an important issue that is relevant year round: Van Allsburg's story teaches tolerance. Just as the Spiveys fear the broom and think it wicked, the rest of us humans sometimes fear what we don't understand. Minna herself does not understand what makes the broom go, but she accepts it and welcomes it into her life. In discussing the main ideas of *The Widow's Broom* with your class, you can help students to uncover this important lesson. Both the images and the story hark back to the real witch trials that occurred in this country—a real-life situation in which lack of tolerance caused a great deal of unnecessary suffering. If you are working with mature older

students, they may find this an interesting link. With younger students it may be more appropriate to limit the discussion to the ample lessons provided by the book itself.

Find Fritz:

Fritz makes his appearance in *The Widow's Broom* as the Spiveys' little dog who is flung into a tree by the broom.



Teaching Ideas

The Widow's Broom is filled with pictures that create an eerie and mysterious mood. When working with younger readers, discuss how the pictures add these feelings to the story. Discuss how the pictures and words work together to create the world of Minna show and her magic broom. With emergent readers, you may want to focus on how readers can sometimes tell the story of the book through the pictures alone. This book provides a wonderful model for children who are working on this skill.

Also for younger readers, the book provides several opportunities for word work and the study of simple spelling patterns. For example, studying the word "broom" leads to the discovery that if you know how to spell "broom," you also know how to spell "room," "boom," "loom," etc. Slightly more advanced students can be drawn into an investigation of the different sounds *oo* makes — for example, *broom*, *took*, *wood*. Chris Van Allsburg's rich text contains several words that may be difficult for even more advanced readers, providing an excellent opportunity to teach children about rereading and using context clues to help when they come to a word they don't know.

Children may make connections between *The Widow's Broom* and fairy tales that are familiar to them. You may want to include this book in a fairy tale study. It uses some of the same ingredients—a witch, magic, a happy ending—yet is an utterly new story. You may want to encourage children who are writing their own fairy tales to study how Van Allsburg includes some of the ingredients of a typical fairy tale yet has written a story all his own.

Guiding Questions for Reading *The Widow's Broom Aloud*

- If you found an injured witch in your garden, what would you do?
- Many people are afraid of the broom. Why isn't Minna Shaw afraid as well?
- Because they don't understand the broom, the Spiveys fear it. Sometimes this happens between people. Can you think of a situation where people fear someone or something they don't understand?
- Was the magic broom really burned? How did Minna trick the Spiveys into thinking her broom was a ghost?

If Objects Were Alive

An upper-grade writing lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Widow's Broom*
- Writing paper and pencils for the students

Background Knowledge:

This lesson works best with students who feel comfortable writing independently about topics of their own choosing. It fits well within a fiction-writing unit but can be presented independently as well.

Introduction:

Read *The Widow's Broom* to your students. Tell them to observe to how Van Allsburg makes the broom come to life and invests it with personality, because they will get to try out a similar idea in their own writing later on.

Teaching:

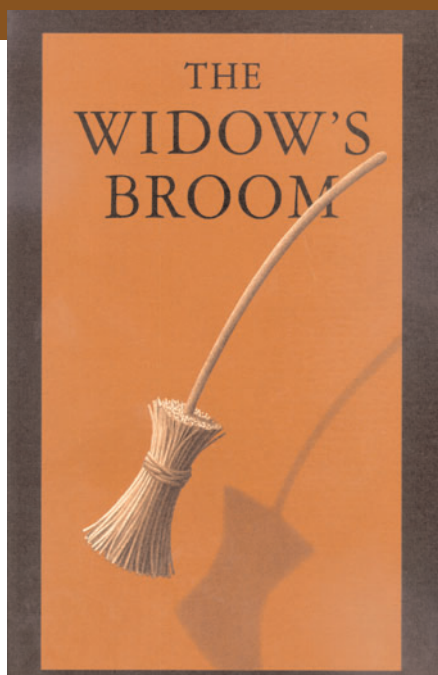
As you read the story to your students, you may want to focus on passages and pictures that describe the broom's behavior. For example:

In the morning she led the broom outside and found that it was a very good student. She needed to show it how to do something only once. Soon the broom could chop wood and fetch water, feed the chickens and bring the cow in from the pasture. It could even pick out simple tunes on the piano.

Or this:

As days went by, the broom seemed as innocent and hardworking as ever. Though it had learned to do many things, sweeping brought it special pleasure. It was, after all, a broom.

Tell the students that Van Allsburg chose to invest an ordinary, everyday object with personality and intelligence, and that he worked hard to describe those attributes in his writing. Tell them that their job is to choose an everyday object that they use a lot and to imagine that it could move and think on its own—just like Minna's broom. As they write a story about the adventures this might bring about, encourage them to describe their object carefully, as though it had its own personality.



Writing Time:

As your students write, confer with them individually about their work.

Share:

Many children are likely to want to share their work. You may want to organize them into partnerships or share groups so that each child has a chance to read his or her story aloud. If time does not permit, choose one or two children who have described their object-character vividly and created a sense of that object's personality.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced writers:

- Choose an object in the room—a pencil, a chair, etc.—and work as a class to write a story about what might happen if that object came to life, as Minna's broom did.
- Turn the writing lesson into an oral storytelling lesson. Decide on an object together. Sit in a circle. You start off the story and then ask each child to add to it as you move around the circle.

Expanding This Lesson:

- Students are not likely to finish their stories in one setting. In subsequent sessions, focus on other aspects of Van Allsburg's story. For example, in *The Widow's Broom*, there are people who accept the magic broom and people who do not. In their own stories, how do other characters relate to their magic objects? Ask them to make sure they include people's reactions into their writing.
- Discuss the idea of anthropomorphism—attributing certain human qualities to nonhuman beings or to objects. Ask your students to choose an object to anthropomorphize. What kind of personality would this object have? How does the nature of the object fit into the personality of the object? For example, Minna's broom can do many things, but its favorite activity is sweeping!

Telling the Story Through the Pictures

A lower-grade reading lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Widow's Broom*
- Picture books for students to read independently or in small groups, divided into bins that can be placed at each table

Background Knowledge:

This lesson works best if you have already read *The Widow's Broom* to your students more than once. Retelling a story successfully through pictures requires the students' to be familiar with the storyline and the characters.

Introduction:

Tell your students that you will be reading *The Widow's Broom* to them and then showing them how readers can retell what happened in the story not just by repeating every word but by using the pictures as a guide. You might want to reserve extra time to read the whole book aloud to your students so that it is fresh in their minds, but this is not necessary.

Teaching:

Tell your students to watch you as you retell the story of Minna and her broom by looking at the pictures. Tell them that this book is especially good for this project because not only are the pictures very expressive, but sometimes Van Allsburg lets them speak for themselves and doesn't include words on the page. As you retell, point to the pictures you are looking at. You might say something like this:

"A witch was riding an old broom. (*turn page*) The broom stopped working all of a sudden, and the witch and broom fell through the air. See, there are no words at all on this page so I have to use the pictures to help me tell the story! (*turn page*) Minna Shaw, the widow, found the hurt witch in her garden and took her inside. (*turn page*)"

As you go through the book, "think aloud" for your students about how you are using the pictures to help you tell the story. Stop when you get to the page where the broom is flinging the dog into the tree - there are no words on this page - and ask your students to turn and talk about how they would retell that page in the book.

As you send your students off to explore their own picture books, remind them that they can do this work on their own.

Reading Time:

As your students retell, confer with them individually about telling the story in a book by looking at the pictures. You may want to bring your copy of *The Widow's Broom* with you as you confer so that you can model this process.

Share:

Ask a child to retell a storybook for the class by looking at the pictures.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Readers:

- More experienced readers can be encouraged to retell using both the pictures and the words.
- Students who are doing beginning print work can be encouraged to use the picture to help figure out a tricky word.
- More experienced readers can be drawn into a discussion about how the pictures complement the words and vice versa. In some places the words are more descriptive, and in some places the pictures are more revealing. Why does Van Allsburg make those choices?

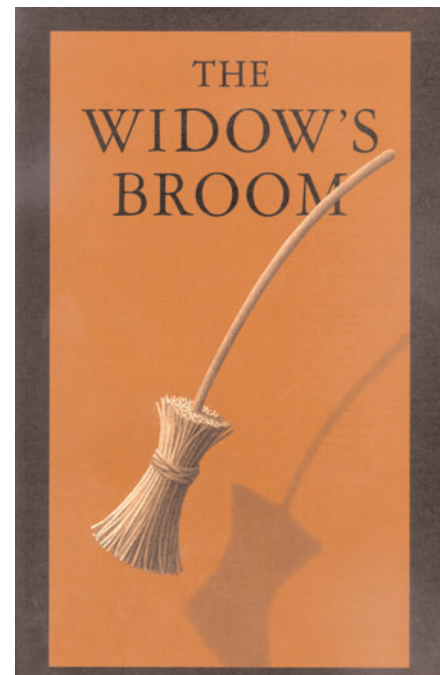
Expanding this lesson:

- Sit in a circle and do a group retelling of *The Widow's Broom*. As you hold the book and turn the pages, ask each child to add on a piece of the retelling.



Just for Fun:

- Choose a picture and write a story about it that has nothing to do with the story in the book.
- Dress up like a witch (or a warlock) and read the story on Halloween.
- Ask your students to design their own magic brooms. What qualities will these brooms have? How will they be helpful? Have your students draw pictures of their brooms and write descriptions of them.

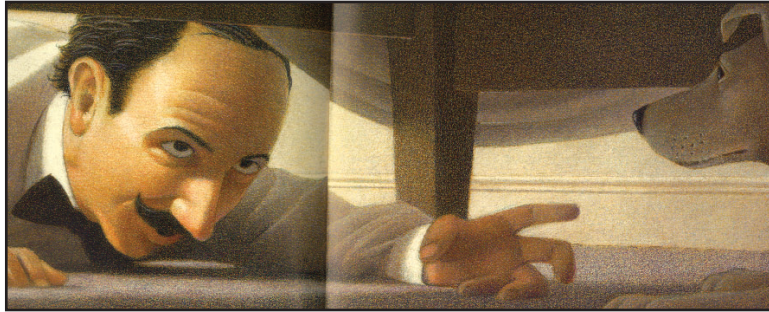


The Widow's Broom (1992)

- ALA Notable Book for Children
- Booklist Editors' Choice
- Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books Blue Ribbon Winner
- Horn Book Fanfare Selection
- IRA/CBC Children's Choice
- School Library Journal, Best Books of the Year

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO
THE SWEETEST FIG

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Book Summary

Monsieur Bibot is a very fussy dentist with an ultra-tidy home who tolerates rather than cares for his sweet little dog, Marcel. One morning an old woman with a toothache appears on his doorstep without an appointment, begging Dr. Bibot for help. Only because he hopes to make extra money, Bibot decides to take care of her tooth. He pulls the tooth, telling her he will give her pills for the pain. The woman thanks him and tells him that while she cannot pay him in money, she will give him something better. She hands two figs to the dentist, telling him, “They can make your dreams come true.” Angrily, Bibot escorts her to the door, telling her she will have to do without the pain pills as they are only for paying customers.

Later, Bibot takes Marcel to the park, pulling roughly on his leash whenever the little dog tries to sniff and explore. Before bed, the dentist eats one of the old woman’s figs—the sweetest, he thinks, he has ever tasted. In the morning, Bibot drags Marcel down the stairs for his morning walk. As he walks down the sidewalk, he notices people staring at him. Catching sight of his reflection in a window, he sees that he is dressed only in his underwear! Bibot remembers that he had dreamed that very thing the night before. As he runs home, he sees the Eiffel Tower drooping over—just as it had in his dreams.

Understanding that the woman spoke the truth about the power of the figs, Bibot works on hypnotizing himself to dream he is the richest man on earth. Night after night, he dreams just that. Finally he decides he is ready to eat the second fig. Placing it on the table, he turns to get something, and little Marcel leaps up and eats the fig himself. Enraged, Bibot chases the dog around his apartment until Marcel takes refuge under the bed. When Bibot wakes up the next morning, he is amazed to find that he is not in his bed but under it. “Come to Marcel,” a voice says, as a hand reaches for him. All Bibot can do is bark.

Special Features

Once again, we are surprised and delighted by the blending of dreams with reality in Van Allsburg’s work. In *The Sweetest Fig*, Bibot’s dreams intrude into his daily reality in a particularly unpleasant way—first when he discovers himself in his underwear in front of a busy café, and next when the sturdy Eiffel Tower droops over like it’s made of supple clay! Van Allsburg has created in Monsieur Bibot a thoroughly unlikable character—he is fussy, unkind, and selfish. He won’t even carry his short-legged dog down the steep stairs

because he “hated to get Marcel’s white hairs on his beautiful blue suit.” We are reminded of fairy tales in which the rude sister or brother does not offer to help the old man or woman disguised as a beggar (who is actually a powerful sorcerer). Just as the rude sisters and brothers in fairy tales get their comeuppance, so does Monsieur Bibot. The lessons in this book provide ample opportunity for discussing with children the importance of being kind and generous. If Monsieur Bibot had been kinder to Marcel, Marcel might not have eaten his fig, or he might not have had the dream he had about Bibot. Monsieur Bibot had many chances to be nice but didn’t take any of them—so he ended up a dog. Perhaps as a dog he will learn the art of kindness; if he is lucky, Marcel will be a different kind of owner and will show him warmth and compassion.

It is wonderful to see Van Allsburg’s typically vivid and expressive illustration style take on Paris—both outdoors in the city and within Bibot’s spare Parisian apartment. You might want to discuss France with your students—familiarize them with Bastille Day and the Eiffel Tower and the expression “sacré bleu”—so these things aren’t confusing to them as you read.

Find Fritz:

Fritz is on the label of a bottle sitting on the counter in Bibot’s kitchen.

Summary of Teaching Ideas

In myths, legends, and fairy tales passed down from generation to generation since the beginning of storytelling, we often find a character who is unkind or selfish and is somehow taught a lesson as a result of his or her poor behavior—the sister who won’t help the beggar woman fetch water from the stream, the brother who won’t carry the old peddler’s load, etc. *The Sweetest Fig*, while definitely a unique and never-before-told story, resonates with these old tales. Monsieur Bibot is thoroughly selfish and unlikable—and is taught a lesson for it. Instead of agreeing to help the old woman simply because it is the kind thing to do, Bibot pulls her tooth thinking only of the money he will receive. When he receives not money but figs, he is enraged and denies the old woman the pills that will ease her pain. Through no one’s fault but his own, the magic of the figs works to punish him for his lack of empathy—both for the old woman and for his little dog, Marcel. You may choose to compare



this story in your class with fairy tales or legends. You may ask students to write a story that teaches a character a lesson for his or her bad behavior. In a reading workshop, you may want to examine how authors create characters we either like or dislike.

Another element of *The Sweetest Fig* is its surprise ending. We readers do not expect either that Marcel will eat the second fig or that he will dream he is a man and Bibot is a dog. This can be a powerful tool for students to use in their own stories—saving the surprise for the very end.

One more interesting idea to think about is the role of dreams in *The Sweetest Fig*. Bibot's first dream is one to which many people can relate. Appearing in public wearing nothing but underwear is a dream that many people have had in some form or another. While Bibot's dream of the bending Eiffel Tower is unique, many of us have dreamed of something strange occurring to familiar and ordinary objects. Asking students to write about their dreams can be a wonderful way to tap into the unique ideas the unconscious presents to us.

Guiding Questions for a *Sweetest Fig* Read-Aloud

- Why does Bibot *smile* when he tells the old woman her tooth must come out? What does this tell us about what kind of a person he is?
- Knowing what you know about Bibot's character, how do you think Marcel feels about him? What in the book makes you think that?
- Sometimes we talk about something good happening as a "dream come true." What is different about the dreams we have at night and the dreams we have during the day? Would you really want the things you dream at night to become real? Why or why not?
- Why does Bibot try to hypnotize himself to have the same dream every night? What is he trying to do?
- Did Marcel's dream come true? What was it? What kind of person do you think he will be? How do you think he might treat his dog Bibot?

Stories That Teach a Lesson

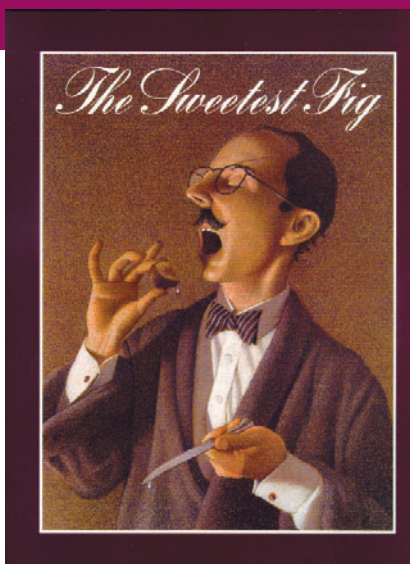
An upper-grade writing lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Sweetest Fig*
- Writing paper and pencils for the students

Background Knowledge:

You will want your students to be familiar with the ideas in *The Sweetest Fig* because you will be focusing on one particular aspect today—the lesson that Bibot is taught. Focusing on this one aspect will be easier and more fruitful if your students have already discussed the book in the context of a read-aloud before you present this lesson. This lesson can be presented in the context of a unit on writing fiction, fairy tales, or fables—but it works well on its own as well.



Introduction:

Tell your students that you will begin by discussing briefly how Chris Van Allsburg teaches Bibot a lesson in *The Sweetest Fig*, and that then they are going to have a chance to write stories in which a character is taught a lesson as well.

Teaching:

Begin with an informal discussion in which you talk with your students about what they think Monsieur Bibot is taught by his experience with the figs. This will need to involve a discussion of his character: What kind of a fellow is he? What kinds of things does he need to learn? Your students may say things like "He is mean," "He is selfish," "He is too particular," "He only thinks of himself." They might suggest that he needs to be taught how to think of others, how to be a good caretaker and friend to Marcel, how to

empathize, how to share, and so on. If your students need your support in coming up with ideas like these, feel free to interject.

Ask your students to think about what Mr. Van Allsburg does in the story to make sure Bibot learns his lesson—and why he chooses that particular device. You will want to guide your students toward the idea that Bibot is placed in a position where he is dependent on Marcel's kindness, just as Marcel was dependent on his. Hopefully, this will help him to become more empathetic and less selfish! Van Allsburg chooses a "punishment" for Bibot that fits exactly with what he needs to learn in order to be a kinder person (or rather, dog).

Tell your students that they will be writing stories like this, in which a character is taught a lesson for his or her poor behavior. They may use stories from their own experience, or they may completely make them up. Tell them that they may have more than one day to finish this process—it is a tricky one.

Writing Time:

During writing time, students should be writing independently. Confer with them individually. You may want to pay particular attention to making sure that the lesson their character is taught actually makes sense. You may also need to check to make sure that the characters' struggles are clear as well.

Share:

Share the work of a student who has written a story in which a character is taught a lesson.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Writers:

- Study this book in the context of other stories that teach a lesson.
- Write or tell a story that tells a lesson together as a class.

Expanding This Lesson:

- You may need to carry this work on over the course of several lessons so that your students have a chance to nurture and revise their work. Writing fable-like stories like these can be difficult.
- Collect the stories your class has written into a book. Share it with your school community.
- Have your students turn their stories into skits to be presented to the rest of the class.

Partnership Discussion: Why Do Readers Like or Dislike Characters?

A lower-grade reading lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Sweetest Fig*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector
- Markers/overhead pens
- Paper, pencils, and books for the students to read on their own

Background Knowledge:

This lesson works equally well whether or not students have previously been introduced to the book. It is helpful if they are working within the context of a reading workshop in which they are reading books independently each day chosen from a leveled classroom library, but the same lesson can be presented in the context of a basal reader as well. You will want, however, to organize your students into writing partnerships before beginning this lesson and ask them to sit next to their partners on the rug as you teach.

Introduction:

If you have not yet read the book to your students, do so now. Tell your students that one of the amazing things that authors do is write characters that are so easy for us to believe in that we actually begin to either like them or dislike them. In *The Sweetest Fig*, the character of Bibot is one about whom many readers develop strong feelings. Tell them that during the lesson, they will be talking about how Chris Van Allsburg creates characters about whom we readers have feelings. Later, in their independent reading work, they will be noticing how they feel about the characters in their own books and discussing this with their partners.

Teaching:

Ask your students how they feel about Bibot. Do they like him or dislike him? Why or why not? Most students will say they don't like him and will be quite willing to list a host of reasons for their feelings—he is mean to his dog, he only thinks of himself, he only helped the woman because he wanted her money, he is selfish, and so on. Tell them that whenever they are reading books with characters in them, it is important to pay attention to how we readers feel about the characters and why we feel that way.

As they go off to read on their own in their partnerships, ask them to keep in mind that you'll be asking them about whether or not they like their characters, and why.

Reading Time:

During reading time children should be sitting near their partners. They need not be reading the same book. As they read independently you will confer with them individually about how they feel about their characters and why.

Stop them midway through reading time and ask them to discuss with each other how they feel about the characters in their books, and what the authors are doing to make them feel that way. Listen in on several conversations during this time.

Share:

Ask a partnership whose conversation you heard to share their thinking with the class. It will be helpful if you choose children who can model not only the thinking work you asked them to do about their characters but also how to talk and listen to each other in a respectful way.



Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Readers:

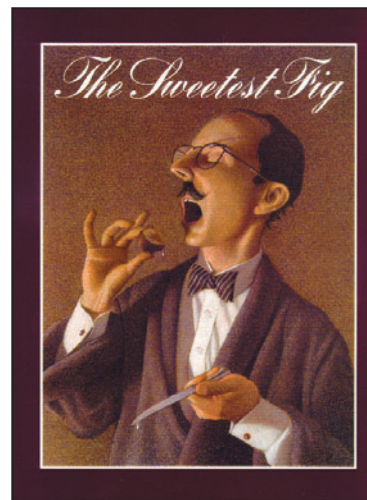
- More experienced readers will be able to go into more depth about *how* Van Allsburg creates his characters as likable or unlikable people. Ask them to notice and discuss more specifically what the authors do in their independent reading to give readers a feeling about their characters.
- More experienced readers will be able to handle having this sort of discussion in the context of book clubs. You can organize your students into groups of four or five and ask them to discuss together how the authors of their books create likeable or unlikable characters.
- How does this lesson transfer into students' own writing? Ask them to pay attention to what they can do in their writing to create characters about whom readers will have feelings.

Expanding This Lesson:

- This lesson could be presented in the context of a study of the story elements. Spend several more lessons discussing character, and then move on to discussions of plot, movement through time, and setting. What does Van Allsburg do in his writing to create each story element? How do the story elements work together?
- Ask each student to write a character description of one of the characters in the book he or she is reading independently.

Just for Fun

- What would happen if you were given magic figs that made your dreams become real—what would you do?
- Imagine you and your pet (or an animal you know) switched bodies—what would happen? Write about it.



The Sweetest Fig

ALA Notable Book for Children
Booklist Editors' Choice

School Library Journal, Best Books of the Year
★ "Van Allsburg swings back into his most mystifying mode with this enigmatic, visually sophisticated tale . . . A significant achievement." —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

BAD DAY AT RIVER BEND

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Book Summary

Riverbend is a sleepy western town, “just a couple dozen buildings alongside a dusty road.” Nothing ever happens in Riverbend until the morning Sheriff Ned Hardy sees a brilliant red light briefly appear and then fade into the sky. Soon the stagecoach pulls into town. Instead of their usual black and white outlines (just like everything else in Riverbend), the townspeople are horrified to see that the coach’s horses are covered with messy, greasy red stripes. Ned Hardy decides to go and look for the missing stagecoach driver. As he follows the wagon’s trail to the west, he sees that the ground is covered with the same greasy red stuff. Ned soon finds the bewildered coach driver sitting on the ground, his face completely filled in with different colored stripes.

As he rides back into Riverbend, Ned sees that many of the buildings have been colored in as well. The townspeople are gathered inside the hotel, avoiding the flashes of light that seem to be leaving the greasy stuff behind. Ned decides to ride in the direction of the lights to “put an end to it” and leaves town with a posse of men. As they look over a hill, they see a strange thing: a man made entirely of the greasy red stuff, “as tall as a cottonwood tree and as skinny as a broomstick.” Convinced that the stranger is responsible for the town’s trouble, Ned and his men gallop over the hill to try to stop him. As soon as they cross the hill, they are frozen in the bright light that suddenly fills the sky . . . and we see the arm of a child with crayon in hand reaching toward the cowboys, who are now quite “colored in.”

The last pages show a full-color pastel drawing of a child hard at work on a coloring book and then walking out the door, leaving the “Cowboy Coloring Book” closed on the table. “And then the light went out,” reads the last page.

Special Features

As we read *Bad Day at Riverbend*, we quickly realize that this is no ordinary picture book. The clear, thick black lines that make up the outlines of the town and its inhabitants are, much to the townsfolk’s horror, being *colored in!* And not very carefully, at that . . . readers have an interesting perspective on this story—we are able to get into the lives of Sheriff Ned Hardy and the other folks of Riverbend as they struggle to find the source of this mysterious greasy color that begins to appear everywhere—but we are also quite aware that Ned and his town are simply figures in a child’s coloring book. The greasy color is, of course, no more than crayon!

The blending of reality and fantasy is something Chris Van Allsburg clearly does well. This particular story is unique in that the

“real world” of the coloring child does not appear until the last pages of *Bad Day at Riverbend*. The bulk of the story takes place in the fantasy world of the living coloring book. Early in the story readers begin to understand that the color entering Ned’s world must be from the crayon of a coloring child—but we don’t know for sure what the townsfolk’s relationship with the greasy stuff or with the young artist will become.

The Sheriff and townsfolk are frightened and disturbed by the messy colored lines appearing out of the blue into their perfectly tidy, perfectly black-and-white town. In the world of an empty coloring book, not much changes. When Ned and company ride off to seek the source of the color, they come upon a tall, skinny cowboy and believe he is the responsible party; we see that the cowboy is merely a child’s stick drawing added into the landscape of the coloring book. It is just as they ride toward the stick figure that they themselves are colored in—and then the book closes.

The child’s coloring—not necessarily careless—but also not particularly thoughtful—greatly affects this little town and each of its citizens.

As the child closes the book and leaves the room, everything goes dark in Riverbend. Readers are left wondering: Is this the end for Ned and the town? Or will daylight come again when the child decides to open the book once more? Will they get used to the color in their lives?

The book brings up some interesting ideas. There could be entire worlds existing, living, and breathing unbeknownst to us; we may have a huge effect on things that we don’t even know exist. It is also interesting that the wild colors entering Riverbend are distressing to the population rather than exciting. This may say something about fearing the unknown, the unexpected. Instead of being frightened by the color, the people could have been inspired or excited. Even the child’s coloring “outside the lines” and drawing in her own cowboy suggests that unconventional behavior is unnecessarily feared by people who tend to stay inside the lines, conform, and avoid breaking the mold. These are interesting ideas to explore with children.

Find Fritz

Fritz appears as a child’s crayon drawing left on the floor of the room.



Summary of Teaching Ideas

This book can be interesting to examine from the inside (the story of Ned and the townsfolk) and also from the outside (it's construct). We can ask students what the device of stepping outside of the story at the end accomplishes. Chris Van Allsburg clearly lets us know that we are stepping outside the story by the dramatic change in the style of the illustrations. We are transported from the world of the black-and-white "coloring book" style of *Riverbend* to the richly textured and detailed pastel drawings that show the "real world" of the coloring child's bedroom. We can ask students to think about how this change in the style of illustrations helps readers understand what is happening in the story, as well.

Older children working on personal essays may be interested in exploring the idea of "coloring within/outside the lines" in a more sophisticated and theoretical way. We can ask them, "What does it mean to color inside the lines? Why are the people scared of the color? How do you, in your life, color inside or outside the lines? What is scary about breaking out of usual patterns? What is good about it?" Any of these questions could start some interesting lines of thinking for personal essays.

Younger children will be able to discuss some of the same ideas, but it may be more useful to have this discussion simply within the context of a read-aloud, where you can support the conversation. With younger children working in a reading workshop, you may want to take advantage of the way Chris Van Allsburg clearly shows his characters' feelings—both in pictures and words. Strong readers always pay attention to how characters feel, and also how the characters' feelings change over time. It can be useful to study this concept in a larger group, and then to ask children to apply what they have learned to their own reading work.

Guiding Questions for a *Bad Day at River Bend* Read-Aloud

- What do you think has happened to the stagecoach? What is the "shiny, greasy slime" covering the horses?
- Look at the illustrations: How do you think the people of Riverbend are feeling about the colored stuff? How can you tell?
- Van Allsburg writes, "Pretty little Riverbend was now too ugly for words," as the houses and streets start to fill with color. Why do the townspeople think the color is ugly?
- How did the tall red cowboy get into Riverbend? Do you think that Sheriff Hardy and his men have anything to fear from the stranger? Why or why not?
- As Sheriff Hardy and his men ride over the hill, they are "frozen in the bright light," that suddenly fills the sky. What is this bright light? What is happening?
- What do you think is happening in Riverbend as the child closes the coloring book and leaves the room?

BAD DAY AT



RIVERBEND

Written and Illustrated by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG

Personal Essay: Coloring Outside the Lines

An upper-grade writing lesson

What You'll Need:

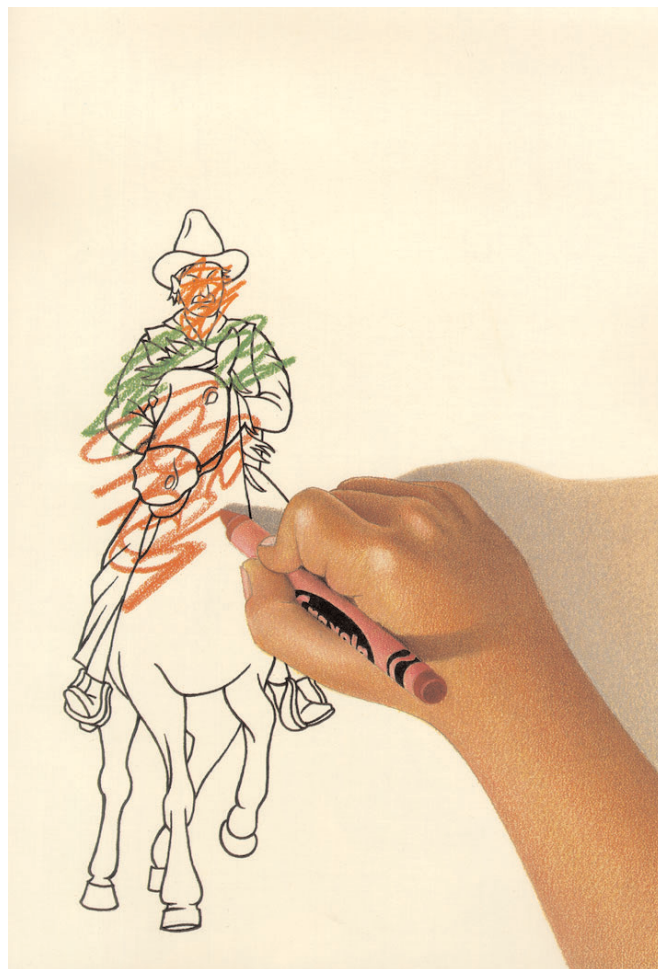
- A copy of *Bad Day at Riverbend*
- Writing paper and pencils for the students

Background Knowledge:

This lesson could take place either in the context of a writing workshop unit of study focusing on personal narrative, or as an independent lesson. You may frame the writing assignment as a simple one-page reflection, or you may choose to ask students to proceed through the writing process and create a more substantial essay. Either way, it will be helpful if students are used to writing independently and comfortable writing about their own experiences and ideas. You will also want them to be organized into "talk partnerships" before they come to your class meeting area so that they can easily "turn and talk" during the lesson.

Introduction:

As your students are gathered around you in a central meeting place, tell them that they will be exploring an idea presented in *Bad Day at Riverbend* by Chris Van Allsburg—the idea of "coloring within the lines." For the purposes of timing, it may be helpful to have already read the story to your class and had a preliminary



discussion of the idea. If time permits, you may read the book and discuss the idea before you present the writing lesson to your students.

Teaching:

Draw your students' attention to the Riverbend residents alarmed at the appearance of the messy swirls of color that enter their lives. Ask your students why the townspeople might find the color alarming as opposed to exciting. Elicit as many ideas as you can from your students—you may want to lead them toward discussing how new or unexpected things can be viewed in a negative way simply because they are unknown. The townspeople are used to living in a particular black-and-white world. There are clear distinctions between right and wrong, between one thing and another. When the world of messy, vibrant color enters their world, their way of life is shaken up. Is this necessarily a bad thing? Ask your students to think of times in their own lives when they have ventured to “color outside the lines” or expand beyond their own comfort zones. You may want to provide them with an example from your own life—for example, “I don't come from a musical family, but I really wanted to learn to play the cello. When I started taking lessons, it didn't come very easily to me—it was not at all within my comfort zone! I felt pretty uncomfortable at first because it was such an unfamiliar thing.” Ask them to turn and talk to their talk partners about their own experiences. How did they feel when they tried something new? How did other people react?

Share several of the students' ideas with the whole class, and then tell them that they will be writing about times in their own lives during which they have colored outside the lines or expanded beyond their own comfort zones. If you plan to continue working on these essays for several days, you may want to ask them to collect as many ideas as they can in their writers' notebooks about this experience before they begin organizing their thoughts into essay form.

Writing Time:

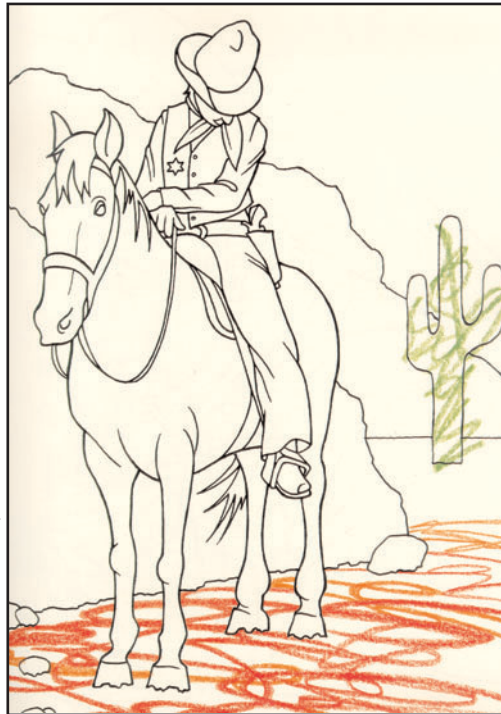
As your students begin writing, you will want to confer with as many individuals as you can. You may want to make sure students understand the analogy of coloring outside the lines and are able to accurately apply the idea to their own life experience. It can be difficult for children to apply abstract ideas to their concretely experienced lives.

Share:

Choose one or two students to either read what they have written to the class or to describe the situation in their own lives to which they are applying the idea of coloring outside the lines.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Writers:

- This lesson will be difficult for younger children who have a harder time thinking abstractly about their own experiences. You may want to simplify the idea to “What makes you an individual? What makes you unique in all the world?” This type of question need not be answered in essay form, which is also a difficult structure for many young writers to tackle. It could even be turned into poetry!



- Have a conversation with your students about coloring books versus free drawing. Chart the benefits and drawbacks of each activity. Which do your students prefer? Why? This type of discussion will provide a scaffolding for a discussion of the abstract idea of “coloring outside the lines.”

Expanding this lesson:

- Ask your students to carry their essay ideas through the entire writing process, focusing on revising and editing to make the best possible product. Create a display or bulletin board with your students about the idea of coloring outside of the lines. Hang their finished essays for everyone to see.

Strong Readers Notice and Discuss How Characters' Feelings Change

A lower-grade reading lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Bad Day at Riverbend*
- Books for your students to read independently

Background Knowledge:

This lesson works best in the context of a reading workshop setting during which the students are comfortable reading daily from books of their own choosing. It fits beautifully into a book club study or partnership work in which talking about the book is a big focus. If your students are working independently, you will want to build some time into your lesson for a discussion with the entire class. The lesson can be presented as though it is in the context of a reading workshop during which children read independently for part of the time and then meet with partners to discuss what they have read. While it may be helpful if students are familiar with *Bad Day at Riverbend* already, this is not necessary.

Introduction:

As your students gather in a central meeting place in your room (next to their talk partners), tell them that one thing strong readers do as they get to know the characters in their books is pay attention to the way the characters' feelings alter as they move through experiences. Tell them that you will be reading *Bad Day at Riverbend* by Chris Van Allsburg and paying attention to the ways that he shows changes in his characters' feelings as they move through the story.

Teaching:

Your students should pay attention to both the pictures and the words to get information about the characters' feelings. Tell them that you will be stopping more than once so that they can talk about how (if) their characters' feelings have changed and why.

Begin reading the book. Stop when you get to the page that shows Ned bending over the colored form of the stagecoach driver.

Ned Hardy got off his horse and discovered the coachman sitting on the ground behind a rock. The poor man looked awful. He was covered with the greasy slime. Thick stripes of the stuff ran right across his eyes and mouth. He couldn't see or speak, except to mumble.

Ask your students how Ned feels. Encourage them to think about the situation described by the words as well as by Ned's expression as he bends over the man. Ask them to think about how the stagecoach driver feels and why. Have them turn and talk to their talk partners about their ideas, and then share several ideas with the whole class. "He looks scared and surprised in the picture," they may say.

Continue reading, stopping occasionally to ask the children to notice how the townspeople become more and more frightened as the town is filled with more and more color. Stop on the page where Ned makes a decision to seek the source of the color. "We can't spend our lives hiding in here," one of the townspeople says on the previous page. Read the following out loud:

The mysterious light appeared. Some people ran back inside the hotel, but Ned Hardy just stared at the strange light without blinking an eye.

Ask your students to turn and talk about Ned's change. Why has he suddenly become so brave? What happened to change his feelings? How can you tell his feelings have changed?

Tell your students that during their independent reading time they will be paying attention to how the feelings of the characters in their books change as they read. Tell them that as they read alone they will be paying attention to these things so that they can talk about them with their reading partners later.

Reading Time:

As your students read independently, confer with them about the changing feelings of the characters. When you stop them and move them into their reading partnerships, ask them to share their findings with each other.

Share:

Have one partnership reenact their conversation for the whole class. Have them take turns telling each other how their characters have changed and why.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Readers:

- More experienced readers will be able to work with more independence in small groups. This lesson would work beautifully with older readers who are engaged in a serious book club study, for example. Children could be reading independently for part of their work time, and then discussing as a group what they have noticed about the way characters' feelings changed as they read. They can also take the discussion a step further and talk about how the characters' feelings change across different books in the series they are studying.
- More experienced readers can be asked to record their thinking on paper in preparation for their conversations with their partners or clubs. You can ask them to put a sticky note in a place in the book where they notice the characters' feelings are changing so that they are prepared to back up their thinking with evidence from the book.

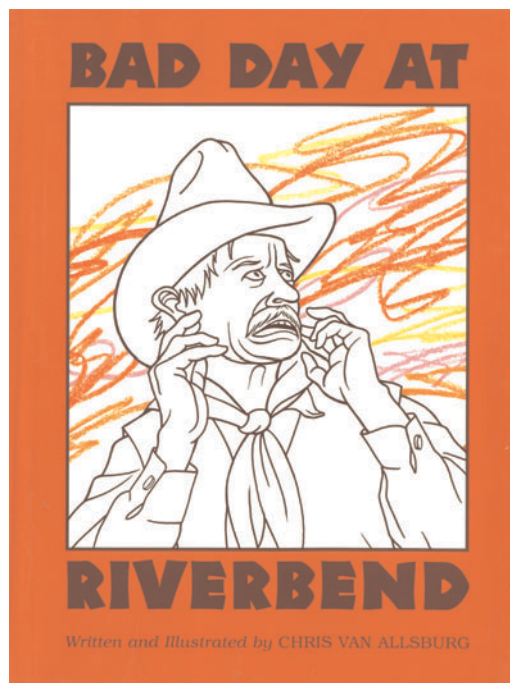
Expanding this lesson:

- Have your students make character webs describing the main characters in the books they are reading independently.

- Have your students work collaboratively to create a presentation about a character from the books they are reading (this will necessitate having partnerships read the same books). Students may create character webs, sketches, and charts to show how their characters change and grow throughout the book.

Just for Fun

- Think of one of your favorite coloring books. Imagine that the characters are as alive as Sheriff Hardy and the townsfolk of Riverbend. Write a story about their adventures.
- Imagine that instead of fearing the color appearing in their town, Sheriff Hardy and the townspeople grow to like it. Rewrite the story.
- Make a coloring book of your own. What is the theme? Who are the characters?
- Discuss with your class the relative benefits/drawbacks of coloring books when compared to drawing freehand.



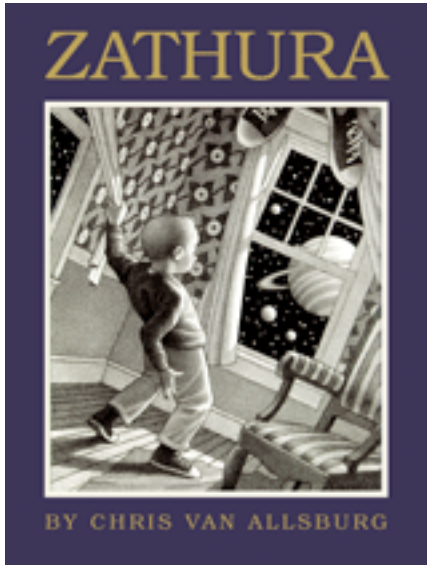
Bad Day at Riverbend (1986)

- ALA Notable Book for Children

"It's a book that starts with one point of view and steps into another. The average bildungsroman accomplishes this kind of transition in several hundred pages: Van Allsburg does it in thirty-two."

— *Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

A Teacher's Guide



Zathura

by Chris Van Allsburg

- About the Book
- Special Features
- Summary of Teaching Ideas
 - Guiding Questions for a *Zathura* Read-aloud
 - Reaching Beyond: Blending Fact and Fiction in Our Stories: An Upper-grade Writing Lesson
 - Getting Along: Resolving Conflict Between Characters in Our Stories: A Lower-grade Writing Lesson

Plot Summary

Danny and Walter Budwing don't get along. When their parents go out for the evening, small arguments escalate until finally Walter, the elder, chases his little brother out of the house and into the park, where he tackles him to the ground. As they wrestle, they catch sight of a board game propped up under a tree. It is called "Jumanji, a Jungle Adventure." Shoving the "baby game" at his brother, Walter heads for home, with Danny trailing behind. As Walter sits down in front of the TV, Danny examines the game. Lodged underneath the Jumanji game board, the little boy finds another game called "Zathura," decorated with exciting-looking flying saucers and planets. Danny starts to play on his own, struggling to read the first game card: "Meteor showers, take evasive action." Immediately, real meteors begin to crash down through the boys' roof! Realizing that they could not possibly still be on Earth, Danny tries hard to convince his disbelieving older brother of the power of the game. Finally, Walter agrees to play. As they play, the game comes to life: Walter sticks to the ceiling for a time in zero gravity. A defective robot seems bent on destroying them. Danny, affected by a gravity surplus, becomes heavy, dense, and round! It is only by working together that they begin to make progress, such as when Walter uses heavy Danny as a bowling ball to flatten the attacking robot. When a black hole swallows Walter, all seems to be lost until the boys find themselves suddenly wrestling again next to the tree in the park. Seeming not to remember the day's events, Danny wants to take the game home. Walter, much wiser for his experience, tosses it in the trash can and suggests a game of catch, much to his little brother's delight.

Special Features

At the end of Chris Van Allsburg's *Jumanji*, Judy and Peter, with great relief at having come through their ordeal, deposit the game in its box back under the tree in the park where they found it — and later see their neighbors Danny and Walter Budwing carrying the box home! After years of wondering what might have happened to the boys who didn't like to read directions, readers get their answer in *Zathura*. Van Allsburg's textured drawings, made with litho pencil on coquille board, show Walter and Danny as two boys full of personality — ornery and argumentative at first. Note: Van Allsburg actually used his own daughters as models for the Budwing boys' interactions! Whereas the world of *Jumanji* invades the home of Peter and Judy, the Budwing boys' home is transported by *Zathura* into outer space, where the strange events the game produces seem delightfully bizarre — a meteor in the living room, a portable black hole. The story is fast-paced and full of action, and readers will enjoy the realistic brotherly banter between the two boys as much as the description of their adventures. As with many of Van Allsburg's characters the Budwings are changed by the difficult experience they go through together. Instead of antagonizing each other, by the end of the story the boys have learned that working together is the way to solve problems, and that they can enjoy each other's company. We are left with a signature Van Allsburg ending as well — did the boys really go into outer space, or was it just a strange dream?

Find Fritz:

Fritz is in the driver's seat of the little toy sports car perched on Danny and Walter's shelf in the bedroom.

Summary of Teaching Ideas

Zathura provides us with a wonderful opportunity to examine how writers can blend scientific information with a fictional story. While not exactly "science fiction," Van Allsburg's story definitely relies on real information about outer space. Using scientific knowledge to create the events in the story helps Van Allsburg to build on the sense of wonder that his stories are known for. His understanding of meteors augments both his illustrations and his description of how they might hit a house:

The noise grew louder, like a thousand golf balls bouncing off the roof. The room got so dark, Walter turned on the lights. Then—KABOOM—a rock the size of a refrigerator fell through the ceiling and crushed the television.

Van Allsburg also had to know a bit about gravity to describe how Walter floats up to the ceiling when he loses his. He had to know that a gyroscope helps keep things level in order to describe what happens to the house when the boys' gyroscope malfunctions:

Suddenly the house tilted. Everything in the room slid to one side, and Danny got buried under a mountain of furniture.

Zathura provides a perfect example of a story that blends fiction and science. Children will be delighted to write their own stories exploring the relationship between these two disciplines. You can easily tie your writing lesson to your science curriculum. If your students are studying bugs, for example, they might write a story including information they have learned about the way bugs live, eat, interact, and so on.

Guiding Questions for a *Zathura* Read-aloud

- How would you describe Danny and Walter's relationship at the beginning of the book? If you have a brother or sister, can you relate to any of the things that happen between Walter and Danny?
- What is keeping Danny and Walter from getting along with each other?
- Danny helps Walter by tying him to the sofa when he is about to fly through the hole in the roof. Do you think Walter is used to being helped by his little brother? How do you think this incident starts to change Walter's perception of Danny?
- What happens between the time when Walter is swallowed by the black hole and the time when the boys find themselves wrestling on the grass in the park? How did they get there?
- How has the boys' relationship changed as a result of their experience?

Reaching Beyond: Blending Fact and Fiction in Our Stories: An Upper-grade Writing Lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Zathura*
- Chart paper and markers
- Writing paper and pencils for the students

Background Knowledge:

It is helpful if your students have already been exposed to the ideas in *Zathura* so they will be more prepared to focus on one specific element of the story. This lesson works well within the context of a unit on writing fiction but can be presented as an independent writing exercise as well.

If you are choosing to focus your lesson around scientific knowledge of outer space, as Van Allsburg does in *Zathura*, you will want to have been working together on gathering information before you present this lesson. You may be engaged in a space study, or you may simply choose to spend some time doing research independent of a space-focused curriculum. One wonderful resource is NASA's For Kids Web site, which is designed specifically for children (<http://www.nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/5-8/features/index.html>). This Web site offers articles written for the 5–8 reading level, NASA facts, related multimedia, Internet resources, student news, and more. You may choose to guide your students' exploration by assigning them specific aspects of space to research (a simple list can really help), or you may just turn them loose to follow their own space interests. When children begin writing their fictional stories with a collection of information, not only will their imaginations already be stimulated by the act of research and the new things they are learning, but the information will help them to shape their stories and to integrate facts in a believable way.

Introduction:

Tell your students that they will be examining the way Chris Van Allsburg blends scientific facts about outer space with his fictional story in *Zathura*. Ask them to notice, first of all, what particular information about space Van Allsburg chooses to use in *Zathura*. Tell them that you will be writing a list of these facts on the chart paper and then discussing how Van Allsburg blends those facts into the story.

Teaching:

Begin the list in front of your students by thinking out loud. For example, "Hmm—Van Allsburg writes about meteors hitting Walter and Danny's roof. Meteor showers really do occur. Van Allsburg had to know about that to make his illustration and to write that description." You will want also to point out the description to which you are referring:

The noise grew louder, like a thousand golf balls bouncing off the roof. The room got so dark, Walter turned on the lights. Then—KABOOM—a rock the size of a refrigerator fell through the ceiling and crushed the television.

Write "meteor showers" on your chart paper. Elicit more facts from your students. They may say, "There is no gravity in space," or "Many ships that go into space use robots to help them." They may say, "Some planets have gravity that is stronger than Earth's."

When you have made your list, remind your students that Van Allsburg blends these real facts about space into his fictional story about the Budwings' adventure. Tell them that in their writing today, they will have a chance to try out the same thing. You may want to ask them to make a list of scientific facts before they begin to write. You may also want to encourage them to use facts they have been recently studying in class. (For example if they are learning about insects, insect facts might play heavily into their lists.)

Tell students that they must try to work at least three scientific facts into their fictional stories. It is likely that they will not finish this lesson in one class period.

Writing time:

During writing time, help your students get started generating lists of facts they know, and then see that they begin writing stories incorporating these facts. Confer with them individually about this process.

Share:

Share the work of a student or two who has made headway toward beginning a story that blends fact with fiction.

Adapting this lesson for use with less experienced writers:

- Create a story blending fact and fiction as a class.
- Use the same facts that Van Allsburg uses in his story, but ask students to make up their own space adventure tales.

Expanding this lesson:

- You will need another class period or two to finish this lesson. You might focus the next lesson on how to use the facts they have collected in the story.
- Make this lesson a part of each of your class's science studies. At the end of the year, children will have a collection of wonderful stories, each exploring the relationship between fiction and science.

Getting Along: Resolving Conflict Between Characters in Our Stories: A Lower-grade Writing Lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Zathura*
- Chart paper and markers
- Paper and pencils for the students

Background Knowledge:

It is helpful if your students have already been exposed to the ideas in *Zathura* so they will be more prepared to focus on one specific element of the story. It is also helpful if you have discussed the book using the guiding questions above so that your students have spent some time thinking about the conflict between Walter and Danny and the way that it is resolved. This lesson works well within the context of a unit on writing personal narrative but can be presented as an independent writing exercise as well—as long as your students have some familiarity with the process of writing personal narrative. Children inevitably will have real-life conflicts from which to draw as they write. You may choose, however, to present the lesson within the context of writing fiction.

Introduction:

Tell your students that most stories involve some sort of conflict, or disagreement between the characters. In *Zathura*, Walter and Danny are two brothers who don't get along with each other very well. Just as Chris Van Allsburg creates a conflict, or disagreement, and then helps Walter and Danny resolve that conflict, your students will be making stories that deal with their own real-life disagreements with siblings or friends.

Teaching:

Read for your students the first page of *Zathura*, in which Walter and Danny are fighting about the broken walkie-talkie. Tell them that Chris Van Allsburg describes the situation so clearly (Walter "let go of Danny's nose and grabbed his ears") that we get a vivid picture in our minds of these rambunctious and argumentative youngsters. It almost seems impossible that these two will ever get along. By sharing the exciting and frightening experience of *Zathura*, however, the boys learn that they must depend on each other to make it back home. Ask the students to turn and talk to someone sitting near them about how Chris Van Allsburg has the boys resolve their conflict: How must they help each other in the story? When you call them back together, they may say things like "Walter uses Danny to break the robot," or "Danny helps Walter by tying him to the sofa when he loses his gravity." Tell them that they will be thinking of and then writing about a situation in which they were disagreeing with a friend or family member but learned to work together in the end. You may want to tell about a situation like this from your own life. For example, "When I was a little girl, my big sister and I used to argue over who had the most space in our room. We were always fighting about it — once we even put a big tape line down the middle! We had to learn to work together, though, when it was time to clean up." Using a real experience from your own life will not only engage your students' attention, but help them to think of an experience in their lives. You may want to suggest some situations you've seen in the classroom, too: "Sometimes kids argue in the block area, but you have to learn how to work together to make your building strong." Have your students close their eyes for a moment to think of a situation they'd like to write about during writing time. When they look up, send them to their tables to begin.

Writing time:

As your students write, move around among them, conferring with small groups or individual students. You may want to teach about the idea of using dialogue to show conflict, the way Chris Van Allsburg does in *Zathura*. You may also help students plan how their stories will go before they begin to write.

Share:

You may choose to have students share their stories in partnerships, or you may choose one or two students to share something they've tried that may help other students or may become a topic for a subsequent lesson — planning, for example, or using dialogue.

Adapting this lesson for use with less-experienced writers:

- Write a group story about a conflict in the classroom.
- Have students draw two pictures — the first showing an argument they've had with a sibling or friend, the next showing how the conflict was resolved. This could become more of a social lesson as well, focused around "getting along."

Expanding this lesson:

- The students' stories will not be finished the first day — you may want to spend several days working on various aspects of writing about character conflict and resolution. Do a lesson on using dialogue, or on having the characters in your story express their feelings.
- Collect the stories into a "friendship book" so that your students have plenty of examples for how conflicts can be resolved.