



THE CANARY IN THE COAL MINE

by Madelyn Rosenberg



GRADES 4-7

About the Book

Bitty, a brave canary, is tired of his twelve-hour shifts in the coal mines of West Virginia. Determined to improve Depression-era mining conditions for both humans and birds, Bitty goes to the big city to seek help, and along the way meets a cast of unforgettable animal characters.

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SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Literature/Language Arts

Questions for Discussion/Writing

The story contains several important themes. Ask students to choose one (or more) of the following and write about examples of how this theme fits into their own life and/or into the lives of people in our society. [CCSS 5.RL.2](#), [5.W.1](#), [5.W.4](#), [5.W.8](#)

Use of animals in human endeavors—The canaries were used to detect gas leaks in the mine. Do you think it's a good idea to use animals in experiments or in other projects that will benefit humans even though it may be harmful to the animals? Why or why not?

Bilingualism/Multiculturalism—Bitty became friends and learned to speak with a variety of birds (and one mouse) from different species. Do you think it is important for people in our society to do the same? Why or why not? Describe similar experiences from your own life where you have related on a positive level with people who are different from you.

Courage/Bravery—Bitty was determined to escape his cage and become free so that he could help the other canaries and the miners. He faced many dangers but never gave up fighting for what he believed. What causes would you fight for? What kind of power do you feel you have to change things that you think are unfair? Do you think that influencing legislators is a good way to change things? Why or why not?

Technology—in the book, Virgil Smith invented a mechanical gas detector for the mines, and Uncle Aubrey described it as “machines to do a bird’s job.” Do you feel that modern technology takes jobs away from people? Can you provide examples of this in today’s world? Do you think this is a good idea? Why or why not?

Anthropomorphism—The author gave Bitty, the other birds, and the mouse human feelings and characteristics, as well as their own languages. How did this add to your enjoyment of the story? What other stories have you read where the author used this technique? [CCSS 5.RL.6](#)

Research

Birds—Many species of birds are characters in the story: canaries, pigeons, chimney swifts, mourning doves, barn swallows, sparrows, cardinals, and seagulls. Students can find information on these birds and their characteristics to determine whether they were well suited for their specific jobs in the story, and why this was so. They can also search on Google Images to see the physical appearance of each species of bird.

Mine Disasters and unionization—Students may be interested in learning more about the history of coal mining in West Virginia and how the United Mine Workers of America was formed. They can formulate questions and search for information using print and electronic resources. (See Electronic Resources below for suggestions.)

CCSS 5.W.7, 5.W.8

Online Resources

Canaries in Coal Mines—www.msha.gov/century/canary/canary.asp provides a series of photos showing the use of canaries in coal mines and includes a glossary of related terms.

Coal Mine Disasters—www.wveha.org/wveha2/ provides a wealth of information on the town of Everettville, West Virginia, where 149 men lost their lives in 1927 in a mine explosion. (This disaster is mentioned in the story.)

Mine Wars—www.wvculture.org/history/minewars.html presents an extensive description of the West Virginia Mine Wars, which occurred in the same place where the story is set.

Charleston, West Virginia Capital—www.wvculture.org/agency/capitol.html provides the history and photos of the capitol building where much of the action of the story takes place.

Classroom activities prepared by Sandy Schuckett, school library consultant.

About the Author

Madelyn Rosenberg is a journalist and picture book author. This is her first novel for children. Madelyn lives in Virginia. Visit her online at www.madelynrosenberg.com/.

