

THE BELL BANDIT *by* JACQUELINE DAVIES

About the Book

Everything about this trip to Grandma's house was different:

First, because of the fire, Mrs. Treski, Evan, and Jessie had driven up to Grandma's two days after Christmas instead of the day before, missing Christmas with Grandma entirely.

Second, the fire had left a hole in the back kitchen wall big enough to drive a car through! And with Grandma in the hospital and not in her house, everything felt off.

Third, someone had climbed the long, slow slope of Lovell's Hill to the top and had stolen the old iron bell hanging on its heavy wooden crossbeam.

Who on earth would steal the New Year's Bell? And how could Grandma, Mrs. Treski, Evan, Jessie, and their neighbors ring in the New Year without it?

Like a modern-day Beverly Cleary, Jacqueline Davies writes with heart, humor, and honesty about the inevitability of profound change and reveals just how well she understands the complex emotions of the children.

About the Author

Jacqueline Davies is the talented, award-winning writer of several novels and picture books. She lives in Needham, Massachusetts, with her family. Visit her website at www.jacquelinedavies.net.

Introduction

The Bell Bandit is a mystery wrapped in a contemporary family story. It touches on a number of issues that are relevant to your students, and it features kids they will find likable and easy to relate to. (In fact, some of your students may have met Jessie and Evan before, in the popular *Lemonade War* novels.)

This guide offers activities and discussion starters for the whole class, small groups, and individuals to extend the enjoyment and the learning in *The Bell Bandit*. It suggests ways to use the novel to explore language arts and literature and goes beyond that to art, science, math, ethics, choral speaking, and social studies.

Activities and Discussions

Pre-Reading

Jessie and Maxwell trudge up Lovell's Hill, but when they reach the crest, something's wrong: *There was the wooden crossbeam. But the bell was gone.*

The Bell Bandit is in part a mystery. Mysteries have unanswered questions and clues to help readers discover the answers. Have the class make a list of the open questions: Who stole the bell? Why? Where is it hidden? As your students progress through the novel, return to this question and give them time to discuss the likely suspects. At this point, each student should write down a guess about who the bandit is and keep the note in a sealed envelope. When the mystery is solved, see who guessed correctly.

Social Studies

Holidays often mean road trips for families, and that is true for the Treski family, who visit Grandma every year during the Christmas vacation. Like most of us on a long car trip, nine-year-old Jessie gets bored. To pass the time, Jessie keeps a running list and count of things they drive past in three categories: what she sees (cows, horses, Mini Coopers); landmarks (totem pole; Whiteface Mountain); and license plates west of the Mississippi (Nebraska; Idaho).

Have the children do what Jessie does on their next car trip or on their next walk: keep track of all the things they see, and then put them into categories. (Cars: make, model, color; landmarks: signs, stores, unusual buildings, etc.)

Put your students' lists together to see what was seen most often; what was seen least often; and the most unusual sighting.

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What other games do your students play when they are travelling? Gather all the ideas and create a class Travel Activity Book. Have children work in teams to write the descriptions of games, list the rules, and even illustrate them. Put the book together and make copies for each family.

Social Studies/Contemporary Issues

Although Jacqueline Davies doesn't say this directly, your students will know that the Sinclair boys are bullies. This gives you an opportunity to get your kids talking about bullying. Have your students tell about a time when they were either the victim of a bully or when they witnessed someone being bullied.

Many schools have adopted a zero tolerance rule with respect to bullying. Introduce your class to the things that your school or your community is doing to prevent bullying. What safeguards are in place to protect children who report a bullying incident?

Have the class create an anti-bullying campaign for your school and community. They can make posters, write and present speeches, make videos, and put information on social media or the school website.

For ideas and inspiration, they can check some of the following websites:

U.S. government:
www.stopbullying.gov

Nemours Foundation:
kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/behavior/bullies.html

National Bullying Prevention Center:
www.pacerkidsagainstbullying.org

PBS Kids:
pbskids.org/itsmylife/friends/bullies

Language Arts/Art

It is a tradition at Grandma's to literally ring in the new year with the family bell on the top of Lovell's Hill. The oldest family member or neighbor and the youngest one hold the bell rope and ring the bell.

All families have traditions. Have each of your students report on one of his or her family traditions. Give them a range of options. They can write an essay, give a speech, create a collage, make a video, sing a song, or bring in a traditional food.

Literature: Style

Authors include hints to events that will happen later in their stories to help prepare readers to understand and expect what is to come. These glimpses are called "foreshadowing," and Jacqueline Davies uses this technique in *The Bell Bandit*. Here are two examples. What does each prepare the reader for?

- At a rest stop, Jessie has a conversation with a man who has momentary lapses in clarity. Jessie sees nothing wrong with him. After a while, Evan pulls Jessie away, telling Jessie:

"That guy is crazy."

"How do you know?"

"You can just tell."

But Jessie couldn't tell.

- *The summer before, Evan and Jessie had built a tepee deep in the woods.*

Have your students find other examples of foreshadowing in the novel and keep a running list of them.

Literature: Character

Jessie

We find out early in the novel that Jessie is a list keeper and a mapmaker. She is an organized thinker. We also learn that she sees herself as different from other children because she is very small. She accepts this about herself, and in turn accepts differences in others with no comments or judgments made. How do these qualities play out in *The Bell Bandit*? How does she use her logical approach, puzzle solving skills, and determination to find their missing grandmother?

Evan

Pete would be proud. That's what Evan thought as he neared the top of Lovell's Hill. There was the bell hanging on the crossbeam, the way it had for as long as he could remember. Something about seeing it there gave him such a sense of gratitude and satisfaction.

Discuss with the class how his relationship with Pete changed Evan's life and perspective.

Maxwell

As your students read *The Bell Bandit*, they will notice that Maxwell relates to the world differently from how other people do. We learn from his mother that he is extremely smart, yet he is different.

"He sees things differently than we do. He feels the world in a different way, too. Things bother him that wouldn't bother you or me, like loud noises or changes in his routine or new people. He has a really tough time understanding feelings."

Have your students make a list of Maxwell's characteristics. What role do these traits play in the plot of the book?

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Jessie and Maxwell

Jessie tells Maxwell:

“Grandma calls me Jessie Bean.”

“Why?” asked Maxwell.

“It’s a nickname.”

“I hate nicknames,” Maxwell said loudly. “Nicknames are mean.”

In some situations nicknames are endearments. In others they can be destructive. Ask the class to read between the lines. What does this comment tell them about Maxwell’s experience? While Jessie likes her nickname from Grandma, she agrees with Maxwell. What happened in school to Jessie that was mean?

Grandma

It’s clear that Evan and Jessie have had a close relationship with their grandmother. But this year, things are different.

It was her face that surprised Evan the most. It looked pale, and she had bags under her eyes, which Evan had never noticed before. Most of all, she couldn’t seem to settle her gaze on anything. Her eyes kept flitting around the room like a bird that’s too afraid to perch on any one thing.

In the kitchen, Jessie’s mom was trying to take Grandma’s coat off, but Grandma kept twisting away, saying it was time to feed the chickens. . . Jessie knew that Grandma didn’t keep chickens anymore.

Ask your students to talk about what is happening to Grandma. What behaviors is she exhibiting? How do Jessie and Evan respond to these changes? The author does not label Grandma’s condition, but your students may have some ideas from their own life experiences, from other books, and from stories they’ve seen on television.

Social Studies/Community Service

Maxwell and Grandma have a genuine friendship. They find comfort in each other, talking, doing puzzles, and watching the old TV series *Get Smart*. They accept each other as they are.

Your students can become involved with older people in your community. Arrange for a visit to a local senior citizen center. Prepare your students for what they may encounter. Students can bring books to read aloud and projects they are working on to share. After the visit, each student should write about his/her experience.

Science

A plumb bob has been used since the time of ancient Egypt to ensure that structures were vertical or plumb. Pete taught Evan how to use one to see if the vertical structures (doors, windows, and walls) in his grandmother’s house were plumb or square to the ground. Evan then went around the house plumb-bobbing

the doors, walls, and windows and found that sometimes even if something looked straight it wasn’t.

How plumb are the walls, doors, and windows in your classroom and in the children’s homes? Your students can make a simple plumb bob using a child’s spinning top and some metal washers. Tie a string to the top of the spinner. Thread some metal washers on to the string to give it some weight. (The more washers the better.) When the plumb bob is held very still, the tip of the spinner will point to the center of the earth.

Ask the children to survey your classroom and their homes with their plumb bobs. They should keep a checklist like the one below.

	Plumb	Not Plumb
Classroom		
Door		
Windows		
Walls		
Home		
Door		
Windows		
Walls		

Assume that the buildings were plumb when they were built, and have the children speculate why many of the doors, windows, and walls are now out of plumb.

Just as your students have discovered in their surveys, Pete told Evan that old houses are out of whack. *Evan nodded. Old houses and old people, he thought.* It isn’t as easy to calculate how steady a person is. Discuss with your students the measures we use to show that a person is in balance or not.

Art

There are several distinct images that your students can use to construct dioramas of scenes from *The Bell Bandit*.

- Start with a scale model of the tepee that Evan and Jessie built in the forest using a rotted tree trunk as its base, heavy limbs, pine branches, twine, and a tarp. (Its description is on pages 34 and 35, and a diagram is on page 36.) For a small box diorama, a good scale would be one foot equals one inch. If some students want to make a larger one, they can just double the scale so that one foot equals two inches.

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- Create the dramatic scene in which Maxwell, Evan, and Jessie haul the bell back up to Lovell’s Hill and place it on its cross-beam.
- Another memorable scene to be captured in a diorama is the final scene on Lovell’s Hill where Jessie, Evan, Maxwell, Grandma, and their friends from the surrounding community gather to ring in the new year.

Quick Questions

- After the first day of working with Pete on the repairs of Grandma’s house, Evan is proud. He’s never felt such a sense of accomplishment in his life. Ask your students to talk about times when they felt proud of their accomplishments.
- The inscription on the bell is “*I sound the alarm to keep the peace.*” What do your students think the inscription means?
- Evan tells his grandma that he wants to take a walk with her when he really doesn’t.
It was okay to fudge the truth when you didn’t want to hurt someone’s feelings.
Have your students talk about when it is okay to lie.
- Jessie implores Maxwell to accompany her to go on a stake-out and spy on the Sinclair house. He refuses. She responds: “*A friend is not supposed to make another friend go on a stakeout alone.*” Ask if any of your students has asked a friend to do something they really didn’t want to and vice versa. What are the boundaries of friendship?

Language Arts/Art/Communication

Advertising for movies is a big business. Divide your class into four or five ad agency teams to tackle this challenge: If *The Bell Bandit* were a movie, what scenes would make the most appealing promotional trailer? Each team should draw a four-panel storyboard to illustrate those scenes.

Trailers and posters for movies use catchphrases to pique our interest in the film. Have each team come up with a catchy slogan for the film.

Literature: Poetry

Jacqueline Davies begins *The Bell Bandit* with an excerpt from the poem “Ring Out, Wild Bells” by Alfred Lord Tennyson. The poem was published in 1850.

Here is a longer portion of the poem:

Ring Out, Wild Bells

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light;
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind,
For those that here we see no more,
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,
And ancient forms of party strife;
Ring in the nobler modes of life,
With sweeter manners, purer laws.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
The faithless coldness of the times;
Ring out, ring out thy mournful rhymes,
But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good.

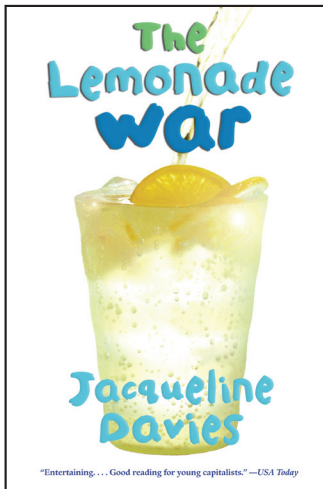
Ring out old shapes of foul disease,
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

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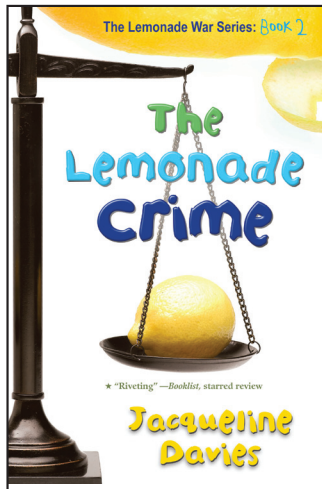
This is a great poem to read aloud as a choral reading. Divide the seven stanzas among groups of students and have each group recite their stanza together. Or, divide the poem into “ring out” and “ring in” lines and have one group of students read the “outs” and another read the “ins.”

Discuss the meaning of each “ring in”/“ring out” line, noting how relevant they are to today, even though the poem was written more than one hundred and fifty years ago. It is interesting to know that the poem is read annually at the national New Year’s Eve celebration in Sweden.

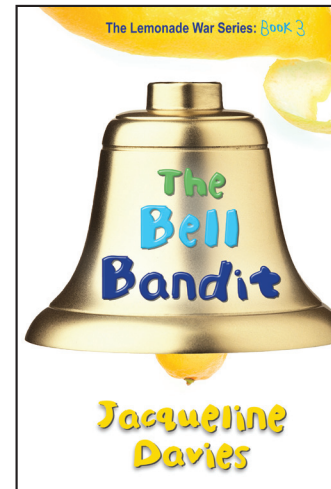
Students might also want to illustrate specific lines or groups of lines from the poem. You can create a long poster of their individual illustrations to hang in the classroom in order.



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