

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-

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.

THE STRANGER



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*