



# The Black Snowman

by Phil Mendez; illustrated by Carole Byard

## Teacher's Guide

Written By Vashti Ivy



CLASSROOM  
FAVORITES

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## Synopsis

The kente cloth, a beautifully colored African cloth, is said to have magic powers. For instance, a storyteller putting on the cloth would have his memory restored, and would be able to remember all the stories of the tribes. When the Ashanti were captured and sold into slavery, the kente cloth was also sold. For many years it was lost, but it still held onto its power.

Jacob needs the power of the kente cloth to restore his self-esteem. Jacob hates being black; he feels that nothing black is good: a black tornado destroys, a black knight is the one who always loses the battle, and black magic is always bad.

One day, Jacob's brother, Peewee, insists on Jacob helping him build a snowman. This is just what Jacob needs—the snow is all black from people trampling it, car exhaust and city dirt landing in it, and the only thing that the boys can build is a black snowman. After completing the snowman, Peewee feels that it needs something to put across its shoulders. He finds a tattered, colored piece of material in the alley and insists that it be placed on the snowman. Jacob, feeling depressed about the color of the snowman, calls it ugly.

The snowman, brought to life by the magic kente cloth around his shoulders, comes to life. "Who are you calling ugly?" he asks Jacob. Peewee can't believe his snowman is alive! Peewee shares a dance with the snowman while Jacob looks on with suspicion. Jacob reminds Peewee that they have to leave the alley to go home. The snowman reminds Jacob that he is being impolite to his new friend. After Jacob rudely tells the snowman that he is no friend of his, the snowman presses his glove to Jacob's forehead and concentrated on the emotions

that run through Jacob's mind. The snowman discovers that Jacob thinks Black is bad. The snowman asks Jacob about his responsibility to his ancestors, which Jacob thinks is crazy.

Hearing their mother's voice, the boys leave the alley and the snowman, agreeing not to tell anyone about their adventure. Later that night, the snowman appears to Jacob in a dream-like vision. As he takes Jacob on a journey through his ancestry, he turns bricks and trashcan lids into mighty African warriors and majestic queens. The snowman asks Jacob where the pride, courage, and self-respect are that have been left to him by the great scholars of Timbuktu, the horsemen of Bornu, the dancers of the Zulu tribes, the storytellers of the Ashanti, and the prayers of the Zande tribes. Still feeling that the snowman is a dream, Jacob runs back to bed.

In the morning, Peewee wants to hunt for old bottles to turn in for cash so he can buy his mother a Christmas present. Jacob refuses to help. There is a great explosion from across the street, and the building Peewee is in goes up in

flames. With the help of the black snowman, the African warriors, and the magic of the kente cloth, Jacob is able to rescue Peewee. A fireman picks up the cloth for his daughter. Jacob is restored to life and love.

## Timeline

### The past

An aged African storyteller wraps himself in a magic kente cloth and remembers the old tales. Later, invaders raid his village, stealing everything and selling the population into slavery in America. The kente is lost and discarded, but it survives and retains its magic.

### The present

Jacob Miller lives in the city with his mother and little brother, Peewee. Peewee has high hopes for Christmas,



but Jacob is old enough to realize they are poor and unable to buy presents. Peewee plans to collect bottles and cans for refunds so he can get something for Mama. In an angry outburst, Jacob declares that he hate blackness, which he blames for his family's poverty and hard life.

## Later

Jacob and Peewee go out to play in the snow. It is trampled and dirty, so they make a black snowman. When the snowman is finished, Peewee finds decorations in the trash, including a colorful cloth that he drapes around the snowman's shoulders.

Under the influence of the kente, the snowman comes alive. He discerns Jacob's hatred of blackness, and admonishes him to accept the gift of courage given to him by his noble African ancestors. Mama calls the boys, and they leave the snowman. Jacob pretends nothing has happened.

## The next day

Jacob lets Peewee go alone to collect cans and bottles in the abandoned building across the street. Suddenly, there is an explosion in the building. Jacob runs outside, and the snowman tells Jacob that Peewee is trapped. Finally, with the aid of the snowman, the kente, and the spirits of his ancestors, Jacob finds the courage to rescue Peewee and get him out of the burning building. In the process, the snowman gives the boys the kente, sacrificing himself. The boys leave the building and are encircled by Mama's hug. Jacob's faith, courage, and self-esteem are restored, and he is filled with love and gratitude.

## Hours later

A fireman, leaving the scene, notices a colorful cloth lying on the ground. He picks it up to take to his daughter so she can make doll clothes with it.

## Critic's Corner

In *The Black Snowman*, first-time author Mendez creates

a much-needed lesson in history, hope, and faith especially aimed at children of color, but relevant for all children. Writing in the *School Library Journal*, reviewer Kathleen T. Horning said of the book, "Mendez' message to the current black generation is clear: Be proud of yourself and your African ancestry."

## About the Author

A legendary cartoonist and animator, Phil

Mendez was the oldest of fifteen brothers and sisters in Bridgeport, Connecticut (hometown of famous *Pogo* cartoonist Walt Kelly). He started developing his craft early, beginning with a cartoon strip in a local shopper's guide. He had his first big break at the age of eighteen, beating out many older and more experienced artists to win the assistant art director position at famed New York advertising firm Dancer/Fitzgerald/Samples in New York City, based on his ability to draw characters. After working at Dancer for 4 ½ years under creative head/art director Bill Tollis (who created many famous ad campaigns, including Trix, Lucky Charms, Cocoa Puffs, and Cheerios), Mendez went on to work as an animator for such companies as Hanna-Barbera, Disney, and MGM. Among many other projects, he has been associated with the cartoons *Kissyfur* and *Ferngully*, and more recently with the animated film *Robots*. *The Black Snowman*, published in 1989, was his first book.



## About the Illustrator

Veteran illustrator Carole Byard beautifully captures both the bleak realities of inner-city life and the color and beauty of Jacob and Peewee's African heritage in her illustrations for *The Black Snowman*. She has illustrated numerous children's books, and won the Coretta Scott King Illustrator's Award in 1977 for her work on *Africa Dream*, written by Eloise Greenfield, and again in 1980, 1981, and 1991 for *Cornrows* (Camille Yarborough), *Grandmama's Joy* (1981), and *Working Cotton* (Sherley Anne Williams), respectively.

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## Cross-Curricular Sources

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## Related Reading

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## Objectives

1. To understand feelings as a positive and negative influence on one's life.
2. To understand and accept oneself as a unique and important individual.
3. To recognize that all people have worth.

## Word Study

Use context clues to determine the meaning of the following words:

1. *Invaders* captured the villages and seized their property. *Invaders: persons who enter by force to conquer*

- or overrun. *Seize: to grasp forcibly and suddenly.*
2. Mama *bustled* about the kitchen until her masterpiece was completed. *Bustle: to busy oneself with much movement.*
  3. Pee-wee carefully *draped* the cloth around the snowman's lumpy body. *Drape: to hang something loosely on something*
  4. Jacob looked at the sooty snowman in his *tattered* hat and shawl. *Sooty: covered with soot, a black powdery substance. Tattered: ragged, shredded; connotes shreds of cloth hanging loosely*
  5. As it spun, it turned into a *majestic* black queen. *Majestic: regal*

### Using the Thesaurus

Find a word or words synonymous with:

1. Seized (grabbed, confiscated, snatched)
2. Suspiciously (distrustfully, shady)
3. Impolite (rude)
4. Squinted (squinted, screwed up one's eyes)
5. Dislodged (moved)

### Word Definition

Find a word in the reading that means:

1. To ravel the edge of a cloth (*fray*)
2. To put aside, to cast off (*discard*)
3. To ridicule (*mock*)
4. To remove from a position of rest (*dislodge*)

### Adjective to Noun

Locate in your reading the noun that the following adjectives describe (*example: ugly black/snowman*)

1. burning/(*building*)
2. beating rapidly/(*heart*)
3. bitter/(*words*)
4. showed dimly/(*streetlights*)

The teacher can supply more from the reading.

## Comprehension Study

1. *The Black Snowman* is a true-to-life story with a twist of fantasy.
  - a. Give examples of reality in the story.
  - b. Give examples of fantasy in the story.
  - c. Tell how the two interweave to form the story.
2. The snowman and Jacob have two different opinions about being black. Each person is able to justify his opinion with facts. List each person's opinion, and the facts to support these opinions.
3. Introduce the students to the art of debating. Some

topics to debate include:

- The advantage/disadvantage of being rich/poor in America.
- The advantage/disadvantage of growing up as a member of a minority group in America.
- The advantage/disadvantage of living in the city/country.

## Discussion Questions

- Why is the kente cloth important to the storyteller?  
*(It restores his memory and helps him to recall the stories he learned as a young man.)*
- What happened to the villagers and the kente cloth?  
*(Invaders captured the village and carried the villagers to ships, where they sailed across the waters to America and were sold as slaves. The kente cloth was also sold.)*
- Identify the people in the Miller family.  
*(Family members are Jacob Miller, a bitter young man who thinks that everything black is bad; Peewee Miller, Jacob's younger brother, who is happy with himself and his family; and Mrs. Miller, the sole supporter of the Miller family, who wants to instill black pride in her sons.)*
- What brings the snowman to life?  
*(The snowman is brought to life by the magic kente cloth that Peewee found in the trash.)*
- What did the forefathers leave to Jacob, according to the snowman?  
*(He has been left the shield of courage.)*
- How does Peewee plan to obtain money for his mother's Christmas present?  
*(He was going to get the money by gathering bottles from the old abandoned building, then redeeming them.)*
- What magic does the snowman produce in the alley for Jacob that night?  
*(He causes bricks to be turned into African warriors, trashcan lids into majestic black queens. Mounds of snow become scholars of Timbuktu. With a wave of his arm, snow becomes horsemen of Bornu, Zulu dancers, wrestlers from Nuba, hunters from Bini. The snow also becomes storytellers from the Ashanti tribes, poets from Tuareg, and saints from Zande.)*
- What does the snowman give to Jacob to help him rescue his brother?

*(The snowman gives Joseph the protection of the kente cloth. The smoke becomes great Africans, who give Jacob courage to find and rescue his brother.)*

- What happens to the snowman as he helps rescue Peewee?  
*(In giving the protection of the kente cloth to Jacob, the snowman loses the cloth's protection, and so he is susceptible to the flames and evaporates.)*
- What happens to the kente cloth after the fire?  
*(A fireman picks up the cloth, planning to give it to his daughter so she can use it to make a dress for her doll.)*

## Activities

### Self-Awareness

- Have students create a recipe for "Pride Salad." (example: Sift together the knowledge that was left to you from your ancestors.)
- Have students create a "Me Mobile." Include objects that make them special.
- Discover your roots: Have students trace their family tree for three generations. (This can be used as a family involvement activity.)
- Remembering the Way It Was: Have students visit (if possible) their grandparents or great-grandparents and ask them questions about schools, transportation, prices and recreation when they were young.

### Feelings

- Have students describe feelings using colors.
- Have students describe when sadness, loneliness, and happiness occur. Have students come up with solutions for sadness or loneliness.

### Sharing

- Create a Graffiti Gripe wall for your students. They may write anything on the wall that upsets them. They should be aware of how they feel when a negative emotion occurs.
- The snowman felt colors in Jacob's emotions. Have students color in the following emotions:
  - frustration
  - loneliness
  - happiness
  - joy
  - sadness
- Draw a timeline of your past, present, and future. Plot the most important events that you hope will happen every fifth year. Include photos and drawings and a brief description of each event.

4. Wish upon a Black Snowman: Have students make snowmen out of black construction paper. Write a wish on the snowman and tell how they can go about making it come true.
5. *The Black Snowman* is a story about the love of two brothers. Have students share how they are bonded to their sibling(s).

### *Relating*

1. Buying a Better Me: Given \$200, the students will “buy” qualities that would improve pride in their heritage (example: \$50 for the values left by their grandparents).
2. Fitting into the World: Have students line up into two parallel lines. As one person walks between the lines, the students pat him/her on the back and offer words of encouragement.
3. Understanding how a character solves a problem can help you to analyze real-life situations. Choose a problem or dilemma presented in the story and complete the following:
  - a. the problem
  - b. the facts
  - c. the solution
  - d. alternative solutions

## Vocabulary Test

Match each **bolded** word with a word or words which mean the same from the list below.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. The kente **restores** his memory.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Invaders captured the villagers and **seized** their property.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. A thousand uses **fray** its delicate threads ...
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. until it is **discarded** as a useless rag.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Peewee carefully **draped** the cloth around the snowman's lumpy body.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Jacob looked at the **sooty** snowman.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. "in his **tattered** hat and shawl"
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Jacob stared **suspiciously**.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. As it spun, it turned into a **majestic** black queen.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Great licking flames **devoured** everything they touched.

- a. consumed
- b. hung loosely
- c. covered with soot
- d. ragged
- e. ravel
- f. grabbed
- g. regal
- h. distrustfully
- i. put aside
- j. brings back

## Comprehension Test

### Part A: Multiple Choice

Choose the best answer to complete each sentence below, place the letter of the answer in the blank.

1. The kente cloth restored the mind of \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. the storyteller      B. the children      C. Jacob
2. After invaders captured the village, the villagers were sold into \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. another tribe      B. slavery      C. another village
3. Jacob Miller was a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ young man.  
A. happy      B. sad      C. angry
4. Jacob thought everything \_\_\_\_\_ was bad.  
A. white      B. black      C. red
5. Mama told Jacob to use his imagination to see the man in the \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. pancake      B. snow      C. sky
6. The magic \_\_\_\_\_ brought the snowman to life.  
A. button      B. kente cloth      C. hat
7. The snowman turned the trashcan lids into \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. majestic black queens      B. African warriors      C. Zulus
8. The kente cloth could only protect \_\_\_\_\_ person(s) at a time.  
A. one      B. three      C. two
9. The African Warriors gave Jacob \_\_\_\_\_ to rescue his brother.  
A. snow      B. courage      C. sight
10. The fireman was going to give the tattered cloth to \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. his daughter      B. Jacob      C. the snowman

### Part B: Matching

Read the description and match it with its character

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. frayed and tattered piece of magic cloth
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 2. restored the faith of a young angry black child
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 3. hunted for bottles to buy perfume for his mother
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 4. made a pancakeman
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 5. gave Jacob courage to find his brother
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 6. thought everything black was bad
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 7. what the bricks were changed into
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 8. what the trashcan lids were changed into
- a. majestic black queens  
b. kente cloth  
c. African warriors  
d. the black snowman  
e. Mama  
f. Peewee  
g. great Africans  
h. Jacob

### Part C: True/False

Mark each sentence either **T** for true or **F** if any part is false.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. The snowman was made from white snow.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Jacob did not like things that were black.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The kente cloth brought the snowman to life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. The kente cloth was from the Ashanti tribe.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. The snowman's wardrobe came from the Miller house.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. The snowman danced with Jacob.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Jacob went with Peewee to hunt for bottles and was caught in the fire.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. The kente cloth protected the snowman and Jacob as they searched for Peewee.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. The snowman evaporated from the heat of the fire.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. The kente cloth was to become a dress for a doll belonging to the fireman's daughter.

### Part D - Essay Questions

1. What did the snowman make out of the snow, bricks, and trashcan lid?
2. What did the snowman do for Jacob's self-esteem?



## Answer Key

### Vocabulary Test

1. j
2. fF
3. e
4. i
5. b
6. c
7. d
8. h
9. g
10. a

### COMPREHENSION TEST

#### Part A: Multiple Choice

1. a
2. b
3. c
4. b
5. a
6. b
7. a
8. c
9. b
10. a

#### Part B: Matching

1. b
2. d
3. f
4. e
5. c
6. h
7. g
8. a

#### Part C: True/False

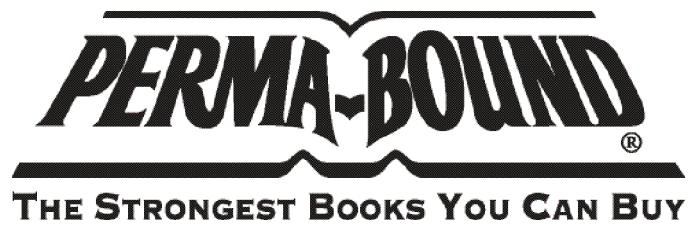
1. F
2. T
3. T
4. T
5. F
6. F
7. F
8. T
9. T
10. T

#### Part D: Essay Questions

1. He made scholars from Timbuktu, horsemen from Bornu, Zulu dancers, wrestlers from Nuba, hunters

from Bini, storytellers from Ashanti, poets from Tuareg, and saints from Zande. He turned bricks into African warriors, and trashcan lids into majestic black queens.

2. With the help of the Kente cloth and Jacob's love for his brother, the snowman was able to help Jacob believe in himself and his heritage. He told Jacob that he must gather the courage that was inside him. This would help him fight the flames of all the bad feelings that he carried. He told Jacob that his strength and his belief could save his brother—they would help him to rescue Peewee.



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