

The Stranger

by Chris Van Allsburg

Classroom Favorites



Teacher's Guide by Kathleen Greenholdt

A Perma-Bound Production

Synopsis

As summer is turning to autumn, Farmer Bailey goes for a ride in his truck. Suddenly, he hears a "thud" and discovers that he has hit a man in the road.

The stranger has not been hurt, but he seems to have lost his memory. He stays with the farmer and his family for three weeks and tries to recover from his amnesia.

However, the stranger really is strange: he is entranced by nature; he does not sweat when he performs hard physical labor; he cannot talk. Also, ever since he arrived, the weather around the Bailey farm seems to be stuck in summer, although to the north of the farm leaves on the trees have turned to the oranges and reds of autumn.

The stranger is very troubled by the weather situation. One day he blows on a green leaf - and it turns to orange. Finally, it occurs to him what he needs to do. Sadly, he leaves the Bailey family, but he returns every year to turn the season from summer to fall.

Biographical Sketch

Chris Van Allsburg was born on June 18, 1949, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He received a B.F.A. from the University of Michigan in 1972, and an M.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1975. In addition to writing children's books, he is an artist specializing in illustration, sculpture, and drawing.

His children's books have received many honors: two Caldecott medals, a Caldecott honor, and the Irma Simonton Black Award, to name a few.

His art has been exhibited in New York City at the Whitney Museum of American Arts, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Alan Stone Gallery.

Mr. Van Allsburg currently resides with his wife Lisa Morrison in Providence, Rhode Island, where he has been teaching illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design since 1977.

Critic's Corner

The Stranger was written in 1986. The book has received the following awards: *New York Times* Best Illustrated Children's Books, Parents' Choice Foundation's Parents' Choice Award for Illustration, Child Study Association's Children's Books of the Year, and *Horn Book* Honor List.

All of the author's books are noted for their clever, colorful illustrations:

"One of Van Allsburg's signature elements is the small dog included in most of his books. 'With the last couple of books, before starting even the thumbnail sketches, I looked forward to placing the dog. It's a little game with me. I look forward to concealing him more and more, so that you might have to spend four or five hours looking for him...the dog...will probably be the most difficult to find in *The Stranger*.'"^{**}

* From *Something About the Author*, Volume 53, Page 169, Gale Research, Inc., 1988.

Objectives

1. To see the beauty and importance of each season
2. To learn to solve a mystery through clues that are given in a story

Class Discussion Questions

1. Who is the stranger?
(*He is autumn.*)
2. How do we know that the stranger is autumn?
(*When he blows on his soup, he makes the room very cold; his body temperature is so cold that the mercury in the thermometer does not move upward (causing the doctor to think that the thermometer is broken); the stranger is fascinated by the birds that fly south; the rabbits want him to follow them; he notices that, after three weeks, the trees to the north of the farm have turned orange and red, while the trees to the south are still green; he blows on a leaf, and it turns from green to orange; and after he leaves, the southern trees immediately turn to autumn colors.*)
3. How do we know that Farmer Bailey hit the stranger in the road?
(*Cool air was blowing across the farmer's face right before he heard the "thud." The cool air was probably the breath of the stranger, who must have gotten too close to the truck. After all, he is unfamiliar with buttons and pitchforks, and he is probably not very used to being around automobiles.*)
4. What would have happened if the season never changed at the Bailey farm?
(*It would have stayed warm forever, and nature would have been unable to run its proper course. When things die in nature (during fall and winter), they decompose to help make the ground fertile for the crops the following spring. Also, Farmer Bailey needs the winter period for planting seeds. Nature purifies and improves itself every year through the changing of*

seasons, and each season has its own special beauty: autumn offers red and orange trees; winter has sparkling snow and icicles; spring produces singing birds and buds of plant life; and summer offers flowers and green meadows. All plants and animals rely on the changing of the seasons for feeding, mating, and hibernating.)

5. There are other folk characters who are supposedly responsible for the changing of time and seasons. Can you name them?
(*Mother Nature and Father Time have functions that are very similar to those of the stranger.*)
6. The author/illustrator of the story has a clever trick of hiding a small dog in the illustrations of his books. Where is the dog hidden in this story?
(*The dog, which is in all Van Allsburg books, can be found in the illustrations plate depicting the stranger looking at the green and orange trees from atop a high hill. The dog is hidden among the sheep, in the lower left-hand corner!*)

Meaning Study

balance - steadiness, equal weighting on all sides

drab - dull

etched - carved out

expected - supposed with certainty

fascinated - amazed

figure - a person, especially the body of that person

hermit - a person who lives alone and does not see other people

hypnotized - put into a trance

mercury - the liquid in a thermometer that measures body temperature

occasionally - now and then

parlor - a room (in a house) used for entertaining and lounging

peculiar - strange, not normal

pitchfork - a farm tool used for piling hay

puzzling - confusing

surround - to close in on all sides

temperature - how hot or cold something is

terror - great fright

thermometer - a small, glass stick that is filled with mercury and measures body temperature

timid - shy

trembling - shaking

Activities

1. Ask students to bring to class a few leaves from trees near their homes or from a park. Then, help them make leaf print pictures by dipping the leaves in tempera paints and pressing them on large pieces of construction paper. Use different colors of paint to illustrate green, orange, yellow, red, and brown leaves.

OR

Make a class mural using the leaf print procedure. Use large sheets of white bulletin board paper and lightly outline in pencil a country landscape. Apply the leaf prints (in autumn colors) where the tree leaves should go and on the ground, where they fall. Paint tree trunks, animals, and a farm house to complete the mural scene.

2. Take a field trip to a nearby farm or consult an agricultural organization (examples: Future Farmers of America or county fair offices) for a demonstration about the importance of changing seasons for the survival of farms. You might also want to meet with an environmentalist, who can give your class a topical presentation about changes in our current environment (examples: atmospheric warning and the destruction of the rain forests).
3. Make an over-sized illustration of a thermometer. Explain to your class how the thermometer works, defining "fahrenheit," "celsius," and "degrees."

THEN

Create simple math problems, using temperatures as numbers in addition and subtraction equations.

4. Ask each student to create and write a short passage about his or her own "stranger," but this time let the stranger represent winter, spring, or summer. Without naming their seasons, have the students identify their strangers using clues, such as warm breath and icy hands. Each passage could end with the questions, "Who am I?"

Other Books by This Author

Ben's Dream (New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Books)

The Garden of Abdul Gasazi (Caldecott Honor Book)

Jumanji (Caldecott Medal)

The Mysteries of Harris Burdick (New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Books)

The Polar Express (Caldecott Medal)

The Wreck of the Zephyr (New York Times Outstanding Books)

Vocabulary Test:

Read each sentence below. Circle the meaning of the underlined word.

1. At first, the stranger was very timid around the Bailey family.
A. angry B. loud C. shy
2. Mr. Bailey thought that the stranger was probably a hermit.
A. person who lives alone always B. farmer C. doctor
3. The truck hit a figure in the road.
A. person B. rabbit C. deer
4. It was peculiar when the leaves did not change color.
A. wonderful B. strange C. sad
5. Etched in the frost on the window were the words "See you next fall."
A. hiding B. painted C. carved
6. Mrs. Bailey led the stranger to the sofa in the parlor.
A. bedroom B. sitting room C. kitchen
7. The stranger gazed at the birds as if he had been hypnotized.
A. frozen B. frightened C. put into a trance
8. The doctor did not want his thermometer returned.
A. tool that measures body temperature B. tool that measures heart beats
C. tool that measures bone strength
9. The stranger learned to use a pitchfork quickly.
A. tool used for eating B. tool used for chopping wood C. tool used for piling hay
10. The mercury did not move when the doctor took the stranger's temperature.
A. liquid in a thermometer B. a planet C. one of the Roman gods

Reading Comprehension Test:

1. The stranger was really _____ .
A. autumn B. winter C. summer
2. Mr. Bailey was a _____ .
A. hermit B. farmer C. doctor
3. The birds flew _____ in a "V" formation.
A. north B. west C. south
4. The doctor thought that the thermometer was _____ .
A. helpful B. broken C. worth keeping
5. When the stranger blew on his soup, the room became _____ .
A. cold B. dark C. hot
6. The stranger stayed with the Baileys for _____ weeks.
A. three B. two C. four
7. The rabbits _____ the stranger.
A. scolded B. were afraid of C. liked
8. The stranger wore _____ clothes when he was found in the road.
A. wool B. leather C. fur
9. When the stranger blew on the leaf, it became _____ .
A. green B. orange C. brown
10. After that year, _____ always came one week late around the Bailey home.
A. spring B. summer C. fall

ANSWER KEY

Vocabulary Test:

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. B |
| 2. A | 7. C |
| 3. A | 8. A |
| 4. B | 9. C |
| 5. C | 10. A |

Reading Comprehension Test:

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. A | 6. A |
| 2. B | 7. C |
| 3. C | 8. B |
| 4. B | 9. B |
| 5. A | 10. C |

TEACHER'S NOTES

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**PERMA-BOUND
VANDALIA ROAD
JACKSONVILLE, ILLINOIS
62650**

**PHONE
1-800-637-6581**