

Two Bad Ants

Written and illustrated by
Chris Van Allsburg
Classroom Favorites



Teacher's Guide by Jennifer Lee Richards

A Perma-Bound Production

Synopsis

Two ants desert their kingdom and think they have found happiness. Instead they encounter perils in a strange new world where things are not quite what they seem to be.

From the perspective of an ant our world can be very frightening. *Two Bad Ants* gives new meaning to the expression, "Home Sweet Home."

Biographical Sketch

Chris Van Allsburg was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan on June 18, 1949. He is the son of a dairy farmer and is married to Lisa Morrison. He received his B.F.A. from University of Michigan in 1972 and his M.F.A. in 1975 from Rhode Island School of Design. He lives at 114 Lorimer Ave., Providence, Rhode Island 02906. His office address is: Houghton-Mifflin, 2 Park St., Boston, Massachusetts 02107.

Van Allsburg is an artist, a sculptor, an author and illustrator of children's books, and has been a teacher of illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design since 1977. He has exhibited his work at several museums.

Van Allsburg "liked to do normal kid things like playing baseball and building model cars, trucks and planes." He "also liked to drive a go-cart on public streets, which was illegal." He "lived in a growing suburb with half-built houses, great to spook around in. We were not supposed to do this, obviously our parents were afraid we would hurt ourselves."

The first book he read was a "Dick, Jane and Spot" book. "The lives of this trio were not all that interesting," he said. A young reader's reward for struggling through those syllables at the bottom of the page was to discover that Spot got a bath. Not exactly an exciting revelation. Especially since you had already seen Spot getting his bath in the picture at the top of the page."

The first book he checked out from the library was about Babe Ruth. Van Allsburg said about it, "I started reading it at school and continued reading it at home. I read till dinner and opened the book again after dessert, finally taking it to bed with me. Having grown up with television, I was accustomed to watching something until it was finished." He assumed you read books in the same manner.

Van Allsburg's favorite subject was Art. "Once in the second grade (he) felt feverish at breakfast but concealed it from (his) mother because it was art day." Later that day young Van Allsburg threw up

in a classmate's boot and was sent home!

Van Allsburg said, "there was a great deal of peer recognition to be gained in elementary school by being able to draw well. I drew cartoon figures." Dagwood Bumstead was his specialty.

In the fourth grade Van Allsburg abandoned being an artist because of sports. He had never thought of growing up to be an artist. He had once thought of becoming a lawyer.

"By a bureaucratic oversight (he) was accepted to the art school of University of Michigan. At first it was just a lark (he) thought. (He) thought it would be a great way to earn a college degree by goofing around for four years.

"(He) drew only to pass required courses, spending all (his) time learning how to cast bronze, carve wood and work in ceramics.

"Later (he) started drawing in the evening as a hobby, considering sculpture (his) real job."

It was a friend and his wife, an elementary teacher, who convinced Van Allsburg to try illustrating books. It was his wife who took his first story around to publishers.

Van Allsburg says, "A book is a four-and-a-half month commitment. There are fourteen to fifteen drawings in a conventionally laid out book and by the tenth drawing (he is) ready to start another project.

"I've got a 'sketchbook' in my head," he said, "with thousands of pieces of sculpture and enough descriptions for ten books."

Van Allsburg says his "ability to conjecture color is dependent on (his) continuing to work from life." He said, "Unless I learn the principles of light on color I cannot apply them to things I imagine. I go out to see what the grass looks like in a shadow and then in light."

About correspondence to readers he commented, "I answered the first hundred letters. But then my volume of mail became so great that it would take me four or five days a month to keep up with it."

When Van Allsburg "is not drawing (he) enjoys taking walks and going to museums. (He) plays tennis, sails, and reads quite a lot."

Critic's Corner

Van Allsburg's first book, *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* was one of

New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Books in 1979. It also was a Caldecott Honor Book, won a *Boston Globe-Horn Book* award, earned the Irma Simonton Black Award from Bank Street College of Education, and was one of the International Board on Books honor books.

His books *Jumanji* earned the Caldecott Medal in 1982, and *Polar Express* won the same award in 1986.

Two Bad Ants is similar to Van Allsburg's book, *Ben's Dream* in that they both resemble "woodcuts or engravings, with the feeling of shape conveyed by line. The color is subdued and muted (and yet) the illustrations are magnificent(ly) bold.

"One of Van Allsburg's signature elements is the small dog included in most of his books." Van Allsburg said, "I look(ed) 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." He says the hardest book to find the dog in is in *The Stranger*.

Van Allsburg calls himself, "a gentle surrealist." "I'm pleased when my own drawings are mysterious to me," he said. "I like the idea of withholding something, both in drawings and writing. I don't like to be too specific in a drawing. I like turning a face away a little bit, or cropping the drawing with a part of a figure in the frame. I also like leaving something out of the story. There must be something to ponder at the end. My stories neither begin by posing nor end by solving a question. The reader has to resolve the book after he has read it. The book itself is merely chapter one."

Objectives

1. To learn about ants
2. To analyze the concept of happiness
3. To discover a different visual perspective of the world

Meaning Study

1. crystal (p. 4) - one piece of a mixture that is hardened into bits
2. deemed (p. 5) - had an opinion; believed
3. scout (p. 6) - one who goes first; a watchman or lookout
4. departed (p. 6) - left; went away
5. twilight (p. 7) - time of day between sunset and full night
6. anxiously (p. 8) - in a worried way
7. delicate (p. 11) - easily torn or hurt
8. antennae (p. 11) - long, thin organ found on the insect's head, used for feeling and finding things.
9. hovered (p. 16) - remained in place above an object
10. whirlpool (p. 19) - water moving in a circle so quickly that it dips down in the middle and pulls objects into it

11. disk (p. 21) - round, flat object
12. feverish (p. 24) - hot and uncomfortable
13. chamber (p. 26) - room or space set aside for special use
14. stunned (p. 29) - shocked
15. senseless (p. 29) - unfeeling; unconscious
16. exhausted (p. 29) - completely tired
17. amid (p. 30) - in the middle of

Comprehension/Discussion Questions

1. Decide what art medium Van Allsburg used to create the illustrations.
2. Discuss the title of the book. Predict how the ants might have been bad.
3. Look at the title page of the book. Where are the ants? What is behind them?
Read the dedication. What does it mean, "To Big C, WFP"?
4. Before reading past page 5, discuss what the sparkling crystal is.
5. Notice the size of the crystal of sugar to the size of the queen ant. Are the proportions right?
6. When reading page 5, discuss what "the ants understood." What does that mean?
7. When researching ants you will find that the worker ants are female. Therefore the two bad ants were females. Ask the students if this changes the story in their view.
8. Notice the physical differences between the queen ant and the worker ants. Especially her wings, the bumps on her antennae, and her coloring.
9. Discuss the term "the ant kingdom" that is used on page 6. What makes the ants' home a kingdom?
10. Identify the "woods" as named on page 7 as grass. Discuss why the ants would call the land around their home a woods.
11. Discuss what the differences are between dusk, twilight and night.
12. Discuss how the scout knew her way back to where the crystals were. Did she leave some kind of trail?
13. Notice the firefly on page 9. What else could the ants have encountered?
14. Discuss how the firefly's light was probably as bright to the ants as a car's bright lights are to us.
15. Discuss the term "a mountain" as it is used on page 10. Where are

the ants? How is the brick wall similar to a mountain for the ants?

16. Discuss how traveling through the cracks between the bricks is similar to a human rounding the corner of a high rise building.
17. Discuss how on page 12 the ants are in a "strange world." Have the students ever been somewhere where they felt like this? maybe when they first came to school, or moved to a new place?
18. Why is there no sky?
19. What is the "glassy wall" the ants climb to get to the crystals? Have students guess before turning to page 14.
20. What makes the ants call where they are "unnatural"? (p. 14) Read page 12 over again and discuss what features are different.
21. Discuss why the students feel the ants stayed in the new world. Were the ants unhappy in their kingdom? Were they bored? Discuss what times the students usually get bored. Have the students ever wanted to run away from home? did they? Share stories.
22. What is the "giant silver scoop" described on page 16?
23. What is the boiling brown lake? (p. 17, maybe coffee or tea?)
24. Notice how the face of the adult "cave" is not completely seen. (similar to other Van Allsburg books).
25. Notice the descriptive word "violently" used on page 18 to describe the intensity of the waves falling against the ants. Discuss other descriptive words used in the story.
26. What is the huge round disk that has holes in it? (p. 21)
27. Decide where the ants are on pages 22 and 23.
28. What is the waterfall seen on pages 24 and 25? the silver tube?
29. Before reading page 25, ask students to predict what comes next.
30. What is the "dark chamber" seen on page 26?
31. Discuss what it is like to be bruised or dizzy. Share stories. Try to describe what the food and water in the disposal must have felt like. (Mushy, slippery, etc...)
32. Discuss the fact that the ants miss the safety and warmth of their old home. (p. 28) Have the students ever been homesick?
33. What happens to the ants on page 29? (They get an electric shock.) Would the ants have really survived this peril? Were there any other times the students thought the ants could not have lived through the dangers?
34. Define "stunned senseless." How would losing their senses

affect the ants? (Note: By doing research students would know ants have no ears, but they can hear sounds through vibrations.)

35. Why do ants decide to go back home? Why didn't they tell their fellow ants about their adventures? or did they later? What would the students have done if they were one of the ants?
36. What sounds did the ants hear on page 31?
37. Have students discuss their families. How are they different? How do they each judge happiness?
38. Have the students ever "gone astray" or disobeyed their parents and later regretted it? Share stories.

Student Activities

1. Read the book aloud to or along with your students. Maybe try reading this book aloud without showing the pictures the first time and have the students guess where the ants are. Let them see if they were right by then re-reading the book while showing the pictures.
2. Read other books illustrated and/or written by Van Allsburg.
3. Find Van Allsburg's "signature," the dog.
4. Compare Van Allsburg's drawings of the ants to the real thing, how do they rate?
5. Notice how Van Allsburg shows shadows in his drawings. Have students go outside and try to draw their shadows or those of other objects.
6. Use an overhead projector or flashlights and a sheet to create shadows.
7. Research about ants and other insects such as crickets, spiders, fireflies.
8. Try to decide which type of ant is depicted in the story.
9. Read literature based on a "buggy" theme. Two good read-aloud chapter books are *The Cricket in Times Square* by George Selden and *The Lighty Club* by Marilyn Singer. With picture books, don't forget to read Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar!*
10. Play the game "Cootie" where players race to assemble a model of an insect's body.
11. Sing the song, "The Ants Come Marching."
12. Bring an ant farm into the classroom to observe.
13. Go outside and look for anthills and watch ants as they work.
14. Define the word "scout" as it is used on page 4. What would the scout's job be? Describe her typical day in a narrative. Define what the ant queen's job is. Write a narrative detailing the activities of her typical day. (You can decide whether to have

- students do these pieces seriously or fictionally. Both types of work should be required to have research done in order to set the scene and provide validity.)
15. Get down on the floor or in the grass and feel the perspective of an ant. Describe it.
 16. Read other books in which the character has a smaller perspective of our world. Ex: *Stuart Little* by E. B. White, *The Borrowers* by Mary Norton, *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* by Beverly Cleary, *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, or John Peterson's *The Littles* series of books. Compare similar episodes.
 17. Use various art supplies to design an ant kingdom. (Again, this could be done both realistically or fictionally.)
 18. The book uses descriptive words to describe the journey the ants take. Use descriptive language to describe a new journey for the ants. Draw a map showing where the ants traveled. Read your essay aloud to the class and then show the illustration, did your audience understand where the ants were?
 19. Get a tape of crickets singing. What does it make the students think of? (I think of summer!)
 20. On page 8 it says the ants listened for the sounds of hungry spiders. What do spiders sound like? If they could talk to the ants, what would they say to lure the ants to their webs? Say these aloud as a dramatic improvisation.
 21. Research "dew." How big would a drop of dew be in proportion to an ant? Like a bucket of water dropping on your head? smaller? bigger?
 22. Name the plant found on page 10.
 23. Define the term "the mountain's face." (p. 11) Research mountain climbing.
 24. List the household items and surroundings the students recognize starting with pages 12 and 13. What room are the ants in?
 25. Look at sugar crystals under a microscope. Do they look similar to the way Van Allsburg has drawn them?
 26. Estimate how many sugar crystals there are in a teaspoon. Try to count them.
 27. Research whirlpools. Have the students ever made small ones in a pool? What did it feel like?
 28. Taste both coffee and tea first without sugar, then with some. Vote on likes and dislikes. Describe the tastes.
 29. What is "the cave" on page 20? Research about caves.
 30. Describe the term, "pitch black" that is used on page 20. Have the students ever been in total darkness? Try to make it pitch black in the room. Describe feelings about the experience.
 31. Eat some toasted English muffins. (Check for ants first!)
 32. The two ants felt feverish on page 24. Have the students ever felt feverish? What temperature do humans have to be to have a fever? What is the normal temperature of an ant?
 33. Research waterfalls. How many of the students have been to Niagara Falls? Share stories and photos.
 34. Try to identify the different food pieces in the disposal mush on pages 26-27. (See a dog?)
 35. Research about electricity. How do the students use electricity each day? How would their lives be different without electricity? Make a list of electrical appliances the students use regularly.
 36. Notice the simile, "the ants were blown out of the holes like bullets from a gun" used on page 29. Look for other similes and metaphors used in the book. Write some new ones.
 37. Write down more perils the ants could have encountered.
 38. Write down what the ants' story would be if they were telling it to some of their buddies back at the ant kingdom.
 39. Create more dialogue for the story with the two ants talking to each other during their adventures.

Bibliography

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Vocabulary Test

Circle the correct answer that could be substituted for each of the underlined words in these sentences from the book.

1. "She deemed it the most delicious food she had ever tasted."
 - A. yelled that
 - B. wrote that
 - C. believed

2. "It was late in the day when they departed."
 - A. left
 - B. sang
 - C. fell asleep

3. "A giant silver spoon hovered above them . . ."
 - A. danced
 - B. twirled
 - C. hung

4. "The ants could feel its force bending their delicate antennae."
 - A. tough
 - B. easily hurt
 - C. long

5. "They climbed the glassy wall and once again stood amid the treasure."
 - A. under
 - B. in the middle of
 - C. above

Comprehension Test

Answer true or false to the following questions. If an answer is false, explain why on the line below it.

1. The two bad ants were the first to find the sparkling crystals.

2. The queen ant was the mother of all the ants.

3. The crystals the ants found were sugar crystals.

4. The two ants hid inside the toaster because it looked like their home.

5. The two bad ants brought back two crystals each in order to apologize to the queen for being bad.

ANSWER KEY

Vocabulary

1. C 2. A 3. C 4. B 5. B

Comprehension

(Written responses for false answers may vary some.)

1. False
A scout ant was the first to bring the sparkling crystals to the kingdom.
2. True
3. True
4. False
The ants got in the toaster because they were on an English muffin that got toasted. They went into the outlets because they resembled their home.
5. False
The ants each chose a single crystal to take home.



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