

Curriculum Tie-ins for Rembrandt's Hat

by Susan Blackaby

TO Pre-K and K–3 Teachers

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I have been a curriculum writer for the major educational publishers and development houses for more than twenty years, working on student and teacher components for basal reading programs. *Rembrandt's Hat* (Houghton Mifflin 2002) is my first picture book. Once you have shared the story with your students, you can use and reuse it to present and reinforce curriculum concepts.

As you evaluate *Rembrandt's Hat* for use in your classroom, keep in mind the following ideas:

- The story is really about loss—the accompanying frustration and the process that one goes through to find solace and reconciliation. Rembrandt is patient and brave, but he does show that sense of helplessness that is hard to avoid, underscored by the breezy quality of the “help” he receives from his pals. If you ask a group of students what they have lost, they all can come up with something, and they all can conjure up that teeth-gnashy feeling.
- It is also a story about friendship and empathy. Rembrandt's friends want to help, but their interest goes only so far. Rembrandt is too nice to turn down their ideas even if he is miserable, and they are kind of bossy and pushy in their approach to his problem—and they lose interest before the problem is solved. On the other hand, Rembrandt asks the clown if she would like to have the hat, rather than telling her it is what she needs—a revealing distinction. It isn't that Boo and Tip and the bird aren't nice; Rembrandt is just nicer. His patience and good nature are happily rewarded, as evidenced by the little scrap on his vest on the last page—lost, and found.
- Coupled with the loss of Rembrandt's hat is the problem of what became of it. Inviting students to speculate on this, since it isn't revealed by the story, gives them a chance to exercise their critical thinking skills to consider sequence of events, make inferences, and draw conclusions. This can be presented in a discussion, through role-playing, or as an individual or group writing activity.
- As the story is read, students can discuss how well the hat substitutes are going to work. Again, this supports critical thinking by having them make predictions based on experience, on inference, and on what has been revealed about the characters' personalities and motives.
- There is an element of counting and categorizing that can be developed: Rembrandt tries on 17 different hats in 11 different colors. The 17 hats are illustrated in a two-page spread. Hats can be grouped by color or by feature, and they can be described using number referents: How many feathers does this blue hat have? Which hat has four pom-poms? and so on.
- There are many, many opportunities for art projects. Making hats is the most obvious. At author events, I have been providing children with materials to create their own character hats. These could be used to act out scenes from the story. In addition, artist Mary Newell DePalma has incorporated bits of maps and thread and little patches of paper and feathers into the illustrations. The students can spin off into their own collages—perhaps to illustrate their ideas about what happened to Rembrandt's hat when it blew away, where the bird flew off to, what the clown does in her spare time, and so on. They can also decorate their hats with their own initials to reinforce letter recognition and wear their hats to play alphabet games.
- For students who are ready to read picture books on their own, *Rembrandt's Hat* has been correlated to the phonics scope and sequence of several exemplary reading programs:

Houghton Mifflin Reading 2003: Grade 1, Theme 10, Week 2

Wholly decodable words 71% Sight words 29%

SRA/Open Court Reading 2002: Grade 1, Unit 6, Lesson 5

Wholly decodable words 75% Sight words 25%

- If you want to arrange an author visit, I am happy to work with you to tailor a presentation that will suit the needs and interests of your students as readers and as writers. Please feel free contact me for more information: sblackaby@comcast.net

I hope these suggestions are helpful as you make story selections for your classroom. I believe Rembrandt's Hat would be a valuable addition to your library and to your curriculum.
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