

Dear Mr. Henshaw

by

Beverly Cleary

Book Information

Beverly Cleary, Dear Mr. Henshaw

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134 Pages

Book Level: 4.9

Interest Level: MG

In his letters to his favorite author, ten-year-old Leigh reveals his problems in coping with his parents' divorce, being the new boy in school, and generally finding his own place in the world.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Christopher Award; Misc./Other; Newbery Medal; SLJ Best Book; State Award

Topics: Careers, Writer; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 12, 90%; Power Lessons Vocabulary, Grades 4-6; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8

Main Characters

Angela Badger the famous author with whom the writers' contest winners ate lunch

Bandit Leigh's dog who rides with Leigh's father in his truck

Barry a boy in Leigh's sixth grade class with whom he becomes a friend

Bill Botts Leigh's father who is a cross-country trucker

Bonnie Botts Leigh's mother with whom he lives

Katy Bonnie Botts's employer who runs Catering by Katy

Leigh Botts the principal character in the story, a boy who shares his thoughts about himself and his family from the time he is in second grade until sixth grade

Miss Martinez Leigh's sixth grade teacher who assigns an author report to the class

Miss Neely the school librarian who was overseeing the Young Writers' Yearbook

Mr. Fridley the custodian at school who notices and takes a special interest in Leigh

Mr. Henshaw a children's book author with whom Leigh corresponds

Vocabulary

composition the act or process of putting words or ideas together, an essay

halyard a rope or pulleys for raising and lowering sails or flags

refinery a building and equipment for removing impurities from metal, oil or sugar

wrath violent anger, rage

Synopsis

Leigh Botts is a young boy who first writes to Mr. Henshaw, a children's author, when he is in second grade. He enjoys a book Mr. Henshaw wrote, and over the next few years in school, he continues to drop a note to Mr. Henshaw about how he has used the book for various schoolwork.

When Leigh is in sixth grade, some changes occur in both his family life and his correspondence with Mr. Henshaw. Leigh is now living with his mother in a new town and attending a new school since his parents' divorce. Leigh is asked to do an author report, which includes writing to an author, for his class assignment, and he naturally chooses Mr. Henshaw. Along with his reply, Mr. Henshaw sends a list of questions for Leigh to answer, which, at his mother's insistence, he does. In answering these questions, Leigh brings to the surface his feelings about his new school, his parents' divorce, his feelings of loneliness, and his dad's forgetfulness. Mr. Henshaw suggests Leigh buy a composition book and begin a diary. Leigh finds he is unable to write in it, until, at Mr. Henshaw's suggestion, he pretends he is writing a letter to someone. He chooses Mr. Henshaw instead of his dad as the person to whom he writes since he was disappointed in the past when his dad never wrote back to him.

Although the book is written in chronological order, three important story lines are interwoven into Leigh's narrative: his efforts in catching the thief who is stealing from his lunchbag, his attempts at story

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writing, and his struggle to understand his feelings towards his father. Leigh has the support of Mr. Fridley, the school custodian, who notices him, empathizes with him, and challenges him to stay positive. He plants the seed of the idea to catch the lunchbag thief by using a burglar alarm. Leigh attempts to write a story for a Young Writers' Yearbook and experiences a lot of frustration. In the end, he heeds Mr. Henshaw's advice that he may not be ready to write a story and instead writes a narrative about a day he spent with his dad on his truck. He is awarded an Honorable Mention for his work and is able to lunch with an author, Angela Badger, through default of the first place winner. She compliments his work and encourages him to keep writing.

Leigh's struggle to understand his father is difficult for him. He works his way through the hurts of forgotten promises, his father losing their dog Bandit, and overhearing another boy's voice while he talked to his father on the phone. Leigh is eventually able to look more objectively at the situation and see that although he can't count on his father's word, his father does miss them.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

In what ways does Mr. Fridley influence Leigh?

Mr. Fridley is perceptive to Leigh's moods and problems, but encourages him to do something about them, such as make a burglar alarm for his lunchbag. He stops Leigh from getting himself in trouble, confronts him by saying he is not the only one whose father doesn't call, and urges him to pick up his attitude and think positively.

Literary Analysis

How does the author's use of a diary style help us to understand Leigh?

This particular writing technique gives the reader an opportunity to not only view events, but to do so from the perspective of a young boy. The feelings are those of a boy, not a grown-up. The reader can learn first-hand the effects different events have on Leigh.

Inferential Comprehension

Leigh eventually seems to come to peace with his father. What do you think caused him to do this?

Leigh realizes that his father is not going to change his habits. He also comes to realize he is not to blame for his parents' divorce, or his father's broken promises. On the day of his dad's visit, Leigh knows that his dad really wanted to see his mom and him, and he missed them while he was on the road.

Constructing Meaning

After reading *Dear Mr. Henshaw*, how might you help someone that's new to your school feel welcome?

Answers may vary, but might include such ideas as "noticing them," inviting them over to your house, and asking them to help you learn how to do or make something, praising them for something they do well. When things are stolen from them, it puts them in a tough spot. If they tell, they might become known as a tattler; if they don't they might continue to get picked on.

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Constructing Meaning

Mr. Bill Botts was a truck driver whose job caused him to be away from home for long stretches of time. Can you think of any other jobs that cause people to be away from their families for long periods of time? What would be some good ways to keep in touch and show that you care?

There are various professions that could be listed, including, but not limited to, the military, government service such as being a diplomat, a traveling salesperson, etc. People can show they care by writing, calling, remembering special occasions, e-mail, sending or bringing back presents, etc.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting After Mr. and Mrs. Botts's divorce, Mr. Botts continued to live in California's Great Central Valley. Mr. Botts became a cross-country truck driver. Provide the students with a highway map of the United States. Choose five midwestern or eastern cities. Have the students design a route to get to those various destinations from Central California. Do some research about trucks. How many miles per gallon does a truck get? How big is the fuel tank? Calculate how far a truck can go before refueling. Indicate on the map where the driver would have to stop to get more gas. Is the stop-over area a point of interest in terms of scenery or culture? Could the driver afford the time to take in the sites?

Understanding Literary Features Through his writing, Leigh shows that people need direction and guidance while growing. Have the students choose a topic or career that interests them. Do a little research to find someone that may be knowledgeable about that particular topic or career and write to them. What questions would you ask? How would you feel when they tell you it will take hard work, patience and practice in order to succeed? Would you be willing to give it that much energy?

Understanding Characterization Lurking within Leigh's new school is a lunchbox thief who is

causing Leigh considerable frustration. Pretend there is a "bandit" in the classroom. He or she may be stealing things like lunches, books, mittens and pencils, or more elusive things like time, attention, test questions and fun. Have the students design a device to "catch the thief." What would the invention look like? Would it set off an alarm or catch the thief in a different way. Be creative.

Understanding the Author's Craft The story was told in diary form. Have the students keep a diary for a number of weeks. Write about activities, feelings, hopes, frustrations, etc. Have them experiment with different formats. Was it easier to write the diary when they were pretending to address someone else? To whom did they write? Was it to someone they knew or someone they had never met? Discuss what the students may have learned about themselves.