

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Preacher's Boy

by

Katherine Paterson

Book Information

Katherine Paterson, Preacher's Boy

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In 1899, ten-year-old Robbie, son of a preacher in a small Vermont town, gets himself into all kinds of trouble when he decides to give up being Christian in order to make the most of his life before the end of the world.

Award: Booklist Editors' Choice; Jefferson Cup Award/Honor; Parent's Choice Award/Honor Book; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Behavior, Disobedience; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Sons; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Coop. Children's Book Center; Religion, Christianity

Main Characters

Earl Weston the father of Ned and Tom; he is a powerful and wealthy member of the community

Elizabeth Hewitt (Beth) Robbie's well-behaved older sister, who resents Robbie's mischievous behavior

Elliot Hewitt Robbie's simple-minded but good-hearted brother, who is dearly loved by Robbie's father; Robbie's feelings toward him alternate between protectiveness and jealousy

Letty Hewitt Robbie's five-year-old sister

Ma Hewitt Robbie's pragmatic but loving mother, who does not believe in idleness or waste

Mabel Cramm the unfortunate victim of one of Robbie's pranks

Ned Weston the spoiled son of Earl Weston who frequently taunts Robbie; Robbie almost drowns him when he makes fun of Robbie's father

Reverend Frederick Hewitt (Pa) Robbie's strong but pacifist father, who tries to treat everyone with kindness; he worries about Robbie's mischievous nature and is extremely protective of Elliot

Reverend J. K. Pelham the fire and brimstone preacher who preceded Reverend Hewitt as the preacher of the Congregational church of Leonardstown

Robert Burns Hewitt (Robbie) the mischievous son of Reverend Hewitt who decides to give up God after he hears Reverend Pelham's terms for getting into heaven; he adores his father and is jealous of his brother Elliot

Tom Weston the brother of Ned Weston; he also taunts Robbie

Violet Finch (Vile) the daughter of a homeless man who takes over Robbie's secret cabin

Willie Beaner Robbie's best friend, who is worried by Robbie's rejection of God and horrified by Robbie's attack on Ned Weston; he remains loyal to Robbie despite his reservations

Zebulon Finch (Zeb) an alcoholic homeless man who hits Robbie on the head with a bottle in a drunken rage

Vocabulary

britches a slang word for pants

dawdle to move slowly

manse a minister's house

pious extremely religious

quarry a place where rock is mined out of the earth, usually leaving a large pit

tentative unsure or hesitant

Synopsis

When Reverend Pelham comes back to Robbie Hewitt's small Vermont town to stem the tide of immorality after Robbie and his friend Willie pull a boyish prank, Robbie decides that if God's rules are so strict and heaven is full of people like Reverend Pelham, he would rather enjoy the time he has left in the world and go to Hell. He determines that his new goal in life is to ride in the newly invented motorcar before the world comes to an end on New

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Year's Day, 1900.

Despite his new philosophy of life, Robbie is still mortified to find out that his father, pastor of the Congregational church, is reading Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, because he is fearful that Pa will lose his job.

Shortly after Reverend Pelham's visit, Robbie's mentally handicapped brother, Elliot, becomes lost during the Fourth of July fireworks. Pa is particularly upset because of the danger of Elliot falling into the town's quarry or the local pond. After finding Elliot safe, Pa collapses in tears. Robbie is both disgusted by his father's weeping and horribly jealous of Pa's overt display of love for Elliot.

In the morning Robbie escapes to his secret cabin in the woods. He goes alone because his best friend, Willie, is busy doing chores. At the cabin he finds that two homeless people, Zeb Finch and his daughter Violet, have moved in. Frustrated by this new development, Robbie leaves.

The next day Robbie and Willie go swimming at Cutter's Pond. Their fun ends abruptly when Ned and Tom Weston, the spoiled sons of a local wealthy businessman, throw Willie and Robbie's clothes in the water. Willie manages to retrieve his clothes, but Robbie's sink out of sight. When Robbie confronts Ned, Ned responds by taunting him with Pa's interest in evolution. Enraged, Robbie dunks Ned under the water for so long that Ned nearly drowns. The Weston boys flee and Robbie hides in an icehouse while Willie sends Elliot back with clothes for him.

Afraid to face Pa, Robbie runs off to the cabin. There he observes the horrible poverty that Violet lives in and develops a scheme to help them and, at the same time, help himself escape the consequences of his fight with Ned. Robbie suggests that he and Violet trick the town into believing that Robbie has been kidnapped and ask for a large ransom. Lack of ink keeps them from finishing the ransom note.

Robbie's plan backfires horribly when he and Violet interrupt Zeb raiding the drugstore and Zeb hits Robbie with a bottle. Badly injured, it is several days before Robbie becomes aware that Zeb is in prison charged with kidnapping and attempted murder because Robbie's prank note was found in Zeb's pocket.

Angered by the attack, Robbie struggles to decide whether he will speak up on Zeb's behalf after Violet pleads with him to save her father. When he finds out that Pa has gone to Tyler to testify for Robbie, Robbie is horrified that his pious father is about to bear false witness. Dizzy and wounded, he persuades Elliot to help him get dressed and begins the ten-mile walk to Tyler. Elliot wants to go with Robbie, but Robbie realizes Elliot will only complicate matters. Before he goes, he tells Elliot to sit by the drugstore and look for a bad man driving in a motorcar. He assumes this will keep Elliot in a safe place, since no car has ever come to his town.

A little while later, Robbie is almost run over by a motorcar that Elliot has hidden in. Elliot then leaps from the back seat to announce to Robbie that he has captured the bad men. Robbie assures Elliot that these are not the bad people he was talking about, and the driver and his passenger give them a ride to Tyler. Robbie considers this long awaited opportunity to ride in a motorcar as a miracle, and he renews his faith in God.

When Robbie testifies and clears Zeb's name, he gains a new respect in his father's eyes. Zeb is put in Reverend Hewitt's custody for three months in an attempt to reform him, but Zeb and Violet disappear when the three months are up.

When New Year's Eve comes, Robbie and his father together ring the bell at the church to proclaim the turn of the century.

Open-Ended Questions

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

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Initial Understanding

Why does Robbie feel out of place in his family?

Robbie has a few reasons for feeling he does not belong in his family. One is that he is the only person in his family who frequently chooses to do things he knows are wrong. Another is that his parents have so many children and responsibilities that Robbie, who is fairly independent, often feels overlooked. A third reason is that he does not share the same interest in spiritual matters that the rest of the family does.

Literary Analysis

Why are Robbie and Reverend Pelham so shocked that Pa is reading Darwin's *The Descent of Man*?

At the turn of the century, Darwin's theory of evolution was very controversial. Not only were people offended by the idea of being descended from apes, but many Christians also felt that Darwin's theories were questioning the Bible's explanation of creation. People who defended Darwin's theories were often branded as unbelievers, but Robbie's father was a very religious man who was still willing to read and consider with an open mind what Reverend Pelham and many others thought to be heresy.

Inferential Comprehension

When Leonardstown is worried about the behavior of the community, they call Reverend Pelham to give them a dose of "fiery damnation." How are Reverend Pelham's ideas about right and wrong different from Pa's ideas?

Reverend Pelham gives sermons emphasizing the consequences of sin. He has a very narrow definition of sin, which even includes thinking bad things. Pa's approach is much less condemning than Pelham's. Pa encourages people to do right, but he does not try to frighten them into thinking the slightest mistake will send them to hell. He thinks it is wrong to be as judgmental of others as Reverend Pelham is. He also feels that God does not want people to be afraid of new ideas, while Reverend Pelham believes that all ideas should come from the Bible.

Constructing Meaning

What arguments does Violet present to Robbie to persuade him to speak up for Zeb after Zeb hit him in the head with the bottle?

First she appeals to Robbie's compassion by telling him that the court is probably going to hang Zeb. She then appeals to Robbie's sense of justice by arguing that Robbie knows that Zeb had not really kidnapped him. She then argues that Robbie is partially to blame for provoking Zeb by interfering. After this she argues that Zeb did not mean to kill Robbie and would be very sorry if he had, in fact, killed Robbie. When this does not work, she tries to work on Robbie's sympathies by saying that if he cannot think of Zeb, he should at least consider what will happen to her if Zeb is gone.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors At the time of this story, automobiles are a new and exciting invention. Robbie becomes interested in them when he sees an advertisement for one. Have the students think about what might be amazing about a car if they had never seen one before, then have them create an advertising

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poster that would make the people of Robbie's time want to buy a car.

Understanding Dialogue Robbie and several other characters frequently use non-standard English. Have the students choose several lines of dialogue written in dialect and rewrite them in standard English. Students may also be challenged to choose prose passages from other books and rewrite them in dialect. Have them share their interpretations in class.

Identifying Reading Strategies Reverend Hewitt feels that Robbie is often too judgmental. Have the students find a place in the story in which Robbie passes judgment on another character. Have them write an argument either supporting Robbie's opinion, or an argument showing why Robbie may be too harsh on the character in question.

Recognizing Cause and Effect Robbie often overlooks the consequences of his actions. Have the students make a chart showing Robbie's actions and the effect those actions eventually had. Have them discuss their charts in class and make suggestions for what Robbie might have done to prevent some of his misfortunes.