

THE WRECK OF THE ZEPHYR

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Book Summary

Traveling along the seashore, the author stops at a small fishing village. He decides to take a walk on a path that leads to the tops of some cliffs high above the sea. He is astounded to find the wreck of a small sailboat so far above the shore—and sitting near it, an old man. When the author asks how the boat came to be on the cliffs, the old man tells a story . . .

The man tells of a boy long ago from the village at the foot of the cliffs that was better than any other sailor in the harbor. He took risks that no other would take in order to prove his superiority. One stormy morning, the old man says, the boy hoists his sails and goes out, in spite of a fisherman's warning. As the boy sails out, the storm begins in earnest. A gust of wind knocks the boom against the boy's head and he falls to the floor, unconscious.

When the boy opens his eyes he is on a beach. The *Zephyr*, his boat, is on the sand near him, far from the reach of the tide. After walking a long time in search of help, the boy climbs an unfamiliar hill and is amazed to see two boats sailing by, high above the water, towing the *Zephyr* behind them. The boy watches the boats enter a harbor and leave the boat at a dock in a small fishing village. He climbs down to the dock and meets a sailor who tells him that the inhabitants of the island rarely see strangers because of the treacherous reef surrounding it. He offers to take the boy home, but the boy refuses to leave until he too has learned to sail above the water.

The next day, the sailor gives the boy a special new set of sails and tries unsuccessfully to teach him how to sail above the waves. He plans to take the boy home in the morning. After the sailor and his wife fall asleep, the boy sneaks out and tries to fly the *Zephyr* again. Under the full moon, the boy sails the *Zephyr* right up out of the water. He sets course for home. Feeling very pleased with himself, he flies higher and higher, certain he is truly the best sailor. He decides he will ring the *Zephyr's* bell above his own town to prove to everyone how great he is—but as he nears the church, the *Zephyr* sinks down until it finally crashes into the trees on the cliff where the author met the old man.

The old man tells the author that the boy broke his leg that night, and that nobody believed his story about flying boats. He spent most of his life doing odd jobs and trying to find the mysterious island again. The author watches as the old man limps down the hill to go do some sailing.

Special Features

One is struck immediately by the rendering of light in Chris Van Allsburg's illustrations in *The Wreck of the Zephyr*. From the

late-afternoon glow when the author finds the *Zephyr's* wreck high above the shore to the dark of the oncoming storm described in the old man's story, each picture captures the time of day and the mood of the sea vividly. The waves deepen and glow as the sunsets. Stars reflect on the sea's surface.

In addition to pictures that so vividly capture the moods of the sea, *The Wreck of the Zephyr* follows a mysteriously haunting storyline. Moving quickly from the voice of the author into the voice of the old man telling his story, we almost forget where we are, forget we are reading a book at all—much as the author must have forgotten his whereabouts as he sat on the cliff listening to the old man talk. This can be an interesting device to discuss with your students: sometimes the *I* voice can switch and tell another story.

The boy is proud of his sailing skill—so proud that he makes a foolhardy decision when he sails out into the storm. When the boom hits his head and knocks him out, we can wonder: Is the rest of the story a dream, or did it really happen? We don't know, even at the end of the story. When the boy awakes to find himself on the strange island, he will not rest until he learns the secret of sailing his ship above the waves. Despite the kind fisherman's efforts, the boy, frustrated by his lack of success with the sailing lessons, lets his pride get the best of him. He sneaks out into the night to practice on his own. Delighted to find that he can in fact sail above the waves, his pride carries him higher and higher until he reaches his home. Not content to have made his way back to his own people, the boy's pride urges him to show off even more and ring his boat's bell above the town so everyone can see. Immediately the boat falls through the trees and comes to rest on the cliffs, breaking the boy's leg in the process.

As the old man gets up to go, the author notices his limp. Could he be the boy in the story? Is the story true? As in so many of Chris Van Allsburg's books, we are left to make that decision on our own.

Find Fritz

Fritz is the dog standing near the fisherman who warns the boy not to go out on such a stormy day on page nine.





Summary of Teaching Ideas

The Wreck of the Zephyr provides us with the opportunity to study the device of nestling one story inside of another. The story that the old sailor tells the man quickly becomes the focus of the book—we almost forget how the book begins, in fact, until we are popped back out into the present day at the very end. In addition, *The Wreck of the Zephyr* provides a wonderful model for studying the idea of ambiguity. Van Allsburg often leaves his audience wondering and provides opportunities for readers to form their own opinions about what has happened. *The Wreck of the Zephyr* can be used with more experienced readers to discuss how strong readers form opinions of their own when the author doesn't come right out and tell them what has happened.

Another way that this book could be used in a reading workshop is to discuss how prideful characters are often taught lessons. The prideful young sailor, for example, flies too high and as a result crashes his boat into a tree. Can your students think of other books or stories in which characters that are full of pride pay a price? (The myth of Daedalus and Icarus comes to mind.)

Van Allsburg's writing and illustrations both consistently evoke a strong sense of place in each of his books—this is particularly so in *The Wreck of the Zephyr*. Descriptions of the setting are bolstered with details about the time of day and the ever-changing weather. Exploring how adding details about the weather and the time of day evoke a sense of place can be an interesting activity for young writers.

Guiding Questions for a Wreck of the Zephyr Read-Aloud

- Why do you think the boy decides to go sailing despite the fisherman's warning?
- Even though the sailor was kind in taking the boy in and trying to teach him to sail above the waves, the boy sneaks out and tries again on his own. Why is he taking advantage of the sailor's hospitality?
- What makes the Zephyr fall?
- Do you think the old man's story is true, or do you think he simply became unconscious and dreamed the whole thing? Why?
- Do you have any ideas about the old man's identity? What in the book makes you think that?

Strengthening our Descriptions of Setting by Adding Details About the Weather

A lower-grade writing lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Wreck of the Zephyr*
- Writing paper and pencils/pens for each student

Background Knowledge:

While this lesson will be most successful in the context of an

ongoing writing workshop in which students are engaged in writing independently each day about subjects of their own choosing, it can be presented on its own as well. You will want to have read and discussed *The Wreck of the Zephyr* with your students prior to presenting this lesson, as you will be focusing on one element of the text as opposed to experiencing the story as a whole. It is helpful if your students understand the concept of describing the setting when they write.

Introduction:

As your students gather near you in a central meeting place, explain to them that they will be examining how Chris Van Allsburg adds to his description of the setting in *The Wreck of the Zephyr* with details about the weather (both verbal and visual). Tell them that they will be trying out his strategy in their own writing that day.

Teaching:

Refresh your students' memories about the storyline before you read the following excerpt, asking them to notice how Van Allsburg describes the weather:

One morning, under an ominous sky, he prepared to take his boat, the Zephyr, out to sea. A fisherman warned the boy to stay in port. Already a strong wind was blowing. "I'm not afraid," the boy said, "because I'm the greatest sailor there is." The fisherman pointed to a sea gull gliding overhead. "There's the only sailor who can go out on a day like this." The boy just laughed as he hoisted his sails into a blustery wind.

Ask students to share how both Chris Van Allsburg's words and pictures describe the weather. How do these descriptions add to the reader's understanding of the setting? What kind of a morning is it? Why is it dangerous for the boy to be leaving port when a storm is on its way?

Tell your students that as they continue working on their own pieces, they should try adding a description of the weather because it helps the reader know even more about the setting, which in turn makes the story even more real.

Writing Time:

As your students write independently, confer with them individually, encouraging them to try out descriptions of the weather in their own stories.

Share:

Have as many children as you can share their descriptions of the weather in their own stories. Ask other students to report what they remember and notice how they get a clearer understanding of the setting when descriptions of the weather are included.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Writers:

- More experienced students will benefit from this lesson as-is—you can simply encourage them toward more sophisticated and literary descriptions of the weather. Where less experienced writers might say, "It was a bright and sunny day," more experienced writers might say, "The sun reflected off the skyscraper's windows. I had to squint when I looked up."

Expanding This Lesson:

- This lesson could be expanded into a several-day study on writing about setting. What other methods do writers use to describe the setting completely? Sometimes they write about the time of day. Sometimes they write about the light. Sometimes they write about what sounds they hear and what smells they smell. Each of these ideas could be turned into a day's lesson and then incorporated into students' descriptions of setting as a whole.

Decide for Yourself: Dealing with Ambiguity in Books We Read

An upper-grade reading lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Wreck of the Zephyr*
- Books at the students' reading levels for them to read independently

Background Knowledge:

It is helpful if children are comfortable working within the context of a reading workshop that provides time each day for them to read independently from books at their own levels. This lesson will work best when children are reading texts that are sophisticated enough to present some ambiguity—simpler texts tend to present more predictable plot lines. Read and discuss *The Wreck of the Zephyr* with your students before presenting this lesson so that they are able to absorb the story as a whole before exploring one particular line of thinking.

Introduction:

Tell your children that Chris Van Allsburg is a master of ambiguity—he often writes stories that walk a fine line between fantasy and reality, and he often sets up situations that leave his readers wondering what has really happened. You might want to briefly note some examples—in *The Stranger* we are never directly told the identity of the strange man who comes to stay with the Baileys. In *Jumanji* and *Zathura* we can't be quite sure whether or not the children are dreaming or really experiencing the fantastical events of the story. *The Wreck of the Zephyr* provides a wonderful example of how writers often leave some things up to the readers to decide and figure out for themselves. Strong readers make themselves aware of all the possibilities and then make decisions for themselves about what they think is happening.

Teaching:

As your students gather near you in a central meeting place, remind them that *The Wreck of the Zephyr* begins with an unnamed man, presumably the author himself, meeting the old sailor near the wreck of the *Zephyr* up on a cliff. The story the man tells the author quickly becomes the main storyline of the book. We follow the young boy as he is lost in the storm, as he finds the town where people sail their boats above the sea, as he sneaks out to try his



hand and sailing above the waves, and as he crashes into the trees above his own town. And then we remember that it is in fact the old sailor who is telling the story. As he finishes his tale, we read:

A light breeze blew through the trees. The old man looked up. "Wind coming," he said. "I've got some sailing to do." He picked up a cane, and I watched as he limped slowly toward the harbor.

As the story ends, we are left with several questions. We are led to believe that the old man may in fact be the same person as the arrogant young sailor of the story. But we are not told specifically whether or not this is the case. We are left wondering whether the man's story is the truth or merely the invention of a lonely old sailor whose boat was in fact blown up to the cliff by a storm.

We can remind our students that the situation is *ambiguous*; we are left to make decisions on our own. There is no right answer to either question.

At this point, you will want to discuss the students' own opinions of the sailor's identity and the truth of his story.

Then tell your students that they will be looking for ambiguous situations in their own reading. Do the authors of their stories also leave room for readers to make their own decisions about things? As readers, you will encourage them to form their own opinions slowly, using evidence from the text to back up their thinking.

Reading Time:

As your students read independently, confer with them individually. Ask them to describe any ambiguous situations they may have come across in their reading lately. Encourage them to think through the opinions they form as readers, backing up what they tell you with evidence from the text.

Share:

Ask a student or students to share an ambiguous situation they came across in their reading. Ask them to describe the situation and then explain how they formed their own opinion of what happened.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Readers:

- Ambiguity is a difficult concept for less experienced readers to tackle—but forming opinions about what we read is not. Instead of focusing on the idea of ambiguity, focus on using evidence from the text to back up opinions students form about what they are reading.
- Devote an entire lesson to discussing the ambiguity in *The Wreck of the Zephyr* as a class. Approaching the concept as a whole class will allow you to support your students' thinking. You may want

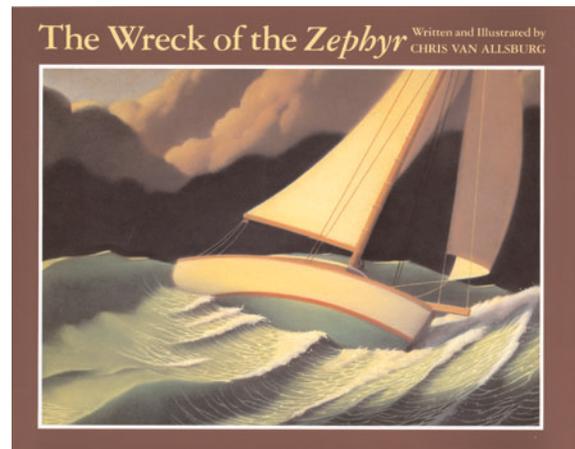
to chart students' ideas. You could even organize a debate between people who think that the sailor's story is true and people who think it is made up.

Expanding This Lesson:

- This lesson could fit nicely into the context of a study that urges children to back up their thinking with evidence from the text. You could teach children how to mark pages that affect their opinions and to keep a record of their thinking in a reading notebook.
- This lesson could also fit within the context of a study on inference—when authors don't come right out and tell us what has happened, we must infer from the text and from theories that we've already developed about the characters.

Just for Fun:

- What if the form of transportation that you use most was suddenly able to fly? Write a story about it—you could write about a flying bike, a flying train, a flying car—even flying shoes.
- Have you ever let your pride get the best of you? What happened? Write about it.



The Wreck of the Zephyr (1983)

- New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Book of the Year
- ALA Notable Book for Children
- Booklist Editors' Choice
- IRA Teachers' Choice

"The full-color pastel drawings are the work of a master: stunning, luminescent, and conveying a sense of the mystical and magical." — *Publishers Weekly*