

BAD DAY AT RIVER BEND

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Book Summary

Riverbend is a sleepy western town, “just a couple dozen buildings alongside a dusty road.” Nothing ever happens in Riverbend until the morning Sheriff Ned Hardy sees a brilliant red light briefly appear and then fade into the sky. Soon the stagecoach pulls into town. Instead of their usual black and white outlines (just like everything else in Riverbend), the townspeople are horrified to see that the coach’s horses are covered with messy, greasy red stripes. Ned Hardy decides to go and look for the missing stagecoach driver. As he follows the wagon’s trail to the west, he sees that the ground is covered with the same greasy red stuff. Ned soon finds the bewildered coach driver sitting on the ground, his face completely filled in with different colored stripes.

As he rides back into Riverbend, Ned sees that many of the buildings have been colored in as well. The townspeople are gathered inside the hotel, avoiding the flashes of light that seem to be leaving the greasy stuff behind. Ned decides to ride in the direction of the lights to “put an end to it” and leaves town with a posse of men. As they look over a hill, they see a strange thing: a man made entirely of the greasy red stuff, “as tall as a cottonwood tree and as skinny as a broomstick.” Convinced that the stranger is responsible for the town’s trouble, Ned and his men gallop over the hill to try to stop him. As soon as they cross the hill, they are frozen in the bright light that suddenly fills the sky . . . and we see the arm of a child with crayon in hand reaching toward the cowboys, who are now quite “colored in.”

The last pages show a full-color pastel drawing of a child hard at work on a coloring book and then walking out the door, leaving the “Cowboy Coloring Book” closed on the table. “And then the light went out,” reads the last page.

Special Features

As we read *Bad Day at Riverbend*, we quickly realize that this is no ordinary picture book. The clear, thick black lines that make up the outlines of the town and its inhabitants are, much to the townsfolk’s horror, being *colored in!* And not very carefully, at that . . . readers have an interesting perspective on this story—we are able to get into the lives of Sheriff Ned Hardy and the other folks of Riverbend as they struggle to find the source of this mysterious greasy color that begins to appear everywhere—but we are also quite aware that Ned and his town are simply figures in a child’s coloring book. The greasy color is, of course, no more than crayon!

The blending of reality and fantasy is something Chris Van Allsburg clearly does well. This particular story is unique in that the

“real world” of the coloring child does not appear until the last pages of *Bad Day at Riverbend*. The bulk of the story takes place in the fantasy world of the living coloring book. Early in the story readers begin to understand that the color entering Ned’s world must be from the crayon of a coloring child—but we don’t know for sure what the townsfolk’s relationship with the greasy stuff or with the young artist will become.

The Sheriff and townsfolk are frightened and disturbed by the messy colored lines appearing out of the blue into their perfectly tidy, perfectly black-and-white town. In the world of an empty coloring book, not much changes. When Ned and company ride off to seek the source of the color, they come upon a tall, skinny cowboy and believe he is the responsible party; we see that the cowboy is merely a child’s stick drawing added into the landscape of the coloring book. It is just as they ride toward the stick figure that they themselves are colored in—and then the book closes.

The child’s coloring—not necessarily careless—but also not particularly thoughtful—greatly affects this little town and each of its citizens.

As the child closes the book and leaves the room, everything goes dark in Riverbend. Readers are left wondering: Is this the end for Ned and the town? Or will daylight come again when the child decides to open the book once more? Will they get used to the color in their lives?

The book brings up some interesting ideas. There could be entire worlds existing, living, and breathing unbeknownst to us; we may have a huge effect on things that we don’t even know exist. It is also interesting that the wild colors entering Riverbend are distressing to the population rather than exciting. This may say something about fearing the unknown, the unexpected. Instead of being frightened by the color, the people could have been inspired or excited. Even the child’s coloring “outside the lines” and drawing in her own cowboy suggests that unconventional behavior is unnecessarily feared by people who tend to stay inside the lines, conform, and avoid breaking the mold. These are interesting ideas to explore with children.

Find Fritz

Fritz appears as a child’s crayon drawing left on the floor of the room.



Summary of Teaching Ideas

This book can be interesting to examine from the inside (the story of Ned and the townsfolk) and also from the outside (it's construct). We can ask students what the device of stepping outside of the story at the end accomplishes. Chris Van Allsburg clearly lets us know that we are stepping outside the story by the dramatic change in the style of the illustrations. We are transported from the world of the black-and-white "coloring book" style of *Riverbend* to the richly textured and detailed pastel drawings that show the "real world" of the coloring child's bedroom. We can ask students to think about how this change in the style of illustrations helps readers understand what is happening in the story, as well.

Older children working on personal essays may be interested in exploring the idea of "coloring within/outside the lines" in a more sophisticated and theoretical way. We can ask them, "What does it mean to color inside the lines? Why are the people scared of the color? How do you, in your life, color inside or outside the lines? What is scary about breaking out of usual patterns? What is good about it?" Any of these questions could start some interesting lines of thinking for personal essays.

Younger children will be able to discuss some of the same ideas, but it may be more useful to have this discussion simply within the context of a read-aloud, where you can support the conversation. With younger children working in a reading workshop, you may want to take advantage of the way Chris Van Allsburg clearly shows his characters' feelings—both in pictures and words. Strong readers always pay attention to how characters feel, and also how the characters' feelings change over time. It can be useful to study this concept in a larger group, and then to ask children to apply what they have learned to their own reading work.

Guiding Questions for a *Bad Day at River Bend* Read-Aloud

- What do you think has happened to the stagecoach? What is the "shiny, greasy slime" covering the horses?
- Look at the illustrations: How do you think the people of Riverbend are feeling about the colored stuff? How can you tell?
- Van Allsburg writes, "Pretty little Riverbend was now too ugly for words," as the houses and streets start to fill with color. Why do the townspeople think the color is ugly?
- How did the tall red cowboy get into Riverbend? Do you think that Sheriff Hardy and his men have anything to fear from the stranger? Why or why not?
- As Sheriff Hardy and his men ride over the hill, they are "frozen in the bright light," that suddenly fills the sky. What is this bright light? What is happening?
- What do you think is happening in Riverbend as the child closes the coloring book and leaves the room?

BAD DAY AT



RIVERBEND

Written and Illustrated by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG

Personal Essay: Coloring Outside the Lines

An upper-grade writing lesson

What You'll Need:

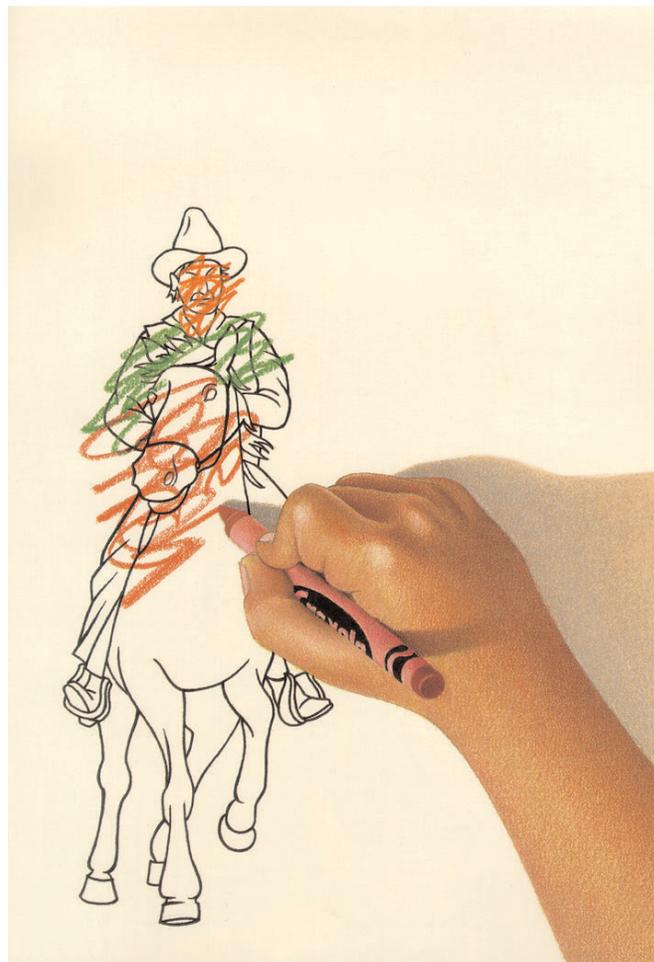
- A copy of *Bad Day at Riverbend*
- Writing paper and pencils for the students

Background Knowledge:

This lesson could take place either in the context of a writing workshop unit of study focusing on personal narrative, or as an independent lesson. You may frame the writing assignment as a simple one-page reflection, or you may choose to ask students to proceed through the writing process and create a more substantial essay. Either way, it will be helpful if students are used to writing independently and comfortable writing about their own experiences and ideas. You will also want them to be organized into "talk partnerships" before they come to your class meeting area so that they can easily "turn and talk" during the lesson.

Introduction:

As your students are gathered around you in a central meeting place, tell them that they will be exploring an idea presented in *Bad Day at Riverbend* by Chris Van Allsburg—the idea of "coloring within the lines." For the purposes of timing, it may be helpful to have already read the story to your class and had a preliminary



discussion of the idea. If time permits, you may read the book and discuss the idea before you present the writing lesson to your students.

Teaching:

Draw your students' attention to the Riverbend residents alarmed at the appearance of the messy swirls of color that enter their lives. Ask your students why the townspeople might find the color alarming as opposed to exciting. Elicit as many ideas as you can from your students—you may want to lead them toward discussing how new or unexpected things can be viewed in a negative way simply because they are unknown. The townspeople are used to living in a particular black-and-white world. There are clear distinctions between right and wrong, between one thing and another. When the world of messy, vibrant color enters their world, their way of life is shaken up. Is this necessarily a bad thing? Ask your students to think of times in their own lives when they have ventured to “color outside the lines” or expand beyond their own comfort zones. You may want to provide them with an example from your own life—for example, “I don't come from a musical family, but I really wanted to learn to play the cello. When I started taking lessons, it didn't come very easily to me—it was not at all within my comfort zone! I felt pretty uncomfortable at first because it was such an unfamiliar thing.” Ask them to turn and talk to their talk partners about their own experiences. How did they feel when they tried something new? How did other people react?

Share several of the students' ideas with the whole class, and then tell them that they will be writing about times in their own lives during which they have colored outside the lines or expanded beyond their own comfort zones. If you plan to continue working on these essays for several days, you may want to ask them to collect as many ideas as they can in their writers' notebooks about this experience before they begin organizing their thoughts into essay form.

Writing Time:

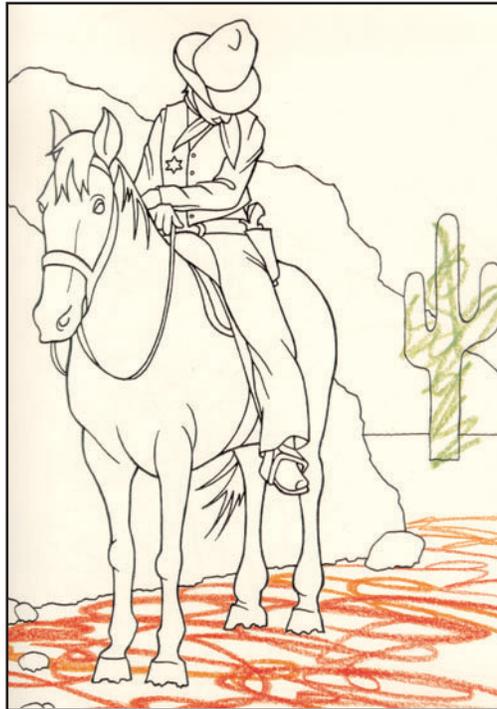
As your students begin writing, you will want to confer with as many individuals as you can. You may want to make sure students understand the analogy of coloring outside the lines and are able to accurately apply the idea to their own life experience. It can be difficult for children to apply abstract ideas to their concretely experienced lives.

Share:

Choose one or two students to either read what they have written to the class or to describe the situation in their own lives to which they are applying the idea of coloring outside the lines.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Writers:

- This lesson will be difficult for younger children who have a harder time thinking abstractly about their own experiences. You may want to simplify the idea to “What makes you an individual? What makes you unique in all the world?” This type of question need not be answered in essay form, which is also a difficult structure for many young writers to tackle. It could even be turned into poetry!



- Have a conversation with your students about coloring books versus free drawing. Chart the benefits and drawbacks of each activity. Which do your students prefer? Why? This type of discussion will provide a scaffolding for a discussion of the abstract idea of “coloring outside the lines.”

Expanding this lesson:

- Ask your students to carry their essay ideas through the entire writing process, focusing on revising and editing to make the best possible product. Create a display or bulletin board with your students about the idea of coloring outside of the lines. Hang their finished essays for everyone to see.

Strong Readers Notice and Discuss How Characters' Feelings Change

A lower-grade reading lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Bad Day at Riverbend*
- Books for your students to read independently

Background Knowledge:

This lesson works best in the context of a reading workshop setting during which the students are comfortable reading daily from books of their own choosing. It fits beautifully into a book club study or partnership work in which talking about the book is a big focus. If your students are working independently, you will want to build some time into your lesson for a discussion with the entire class. The lesson can be presented as though it is in the context of a reading workshop during which children read independently for part of the time and then meet with partners to discuss what they have read. While it may be helpful if students are familiar with *Bad Day at Riverbend* already, this is not necessary.

Introduction:

As your students gather in a central meeting place in your room (next to their talk partners), tell them that one thing strong readers do as they get to know the characters in their books is pay attention to the way the characters' feelings alter as they move through experiences. Tell them that you will be reading *Bad Day at Riverbend* by Chris Van Allsburg and paying attention to the ways that he shows changes in his characters' feelings as they move through the story.

Teaching:

Your students should pay attention to both the pictures and the words to get information about the characters' feelings. Tell them that you will be stopping more than once so that they can talk about how (if) their characters' feelings have changed and why.

Begin reading the book. Stop when you get to the page that shows Ned bending over the colored form of the stagecoach driver.

Ned Hardy got off his horse and discovered the coachman sitting on the ground behind a rock. The poor man looked awful. He was covered with the greasy slime. Thick stripes of the stuff ran right across his eyes and mouth. He couldn't see or speak, except to mumble.

Ask your students how Ned feels. Encourage them to think about the situation described by the words as well as by Ned's expression as he bends over the man. Ask them to think about how the stagecoach driver feels and why. Have them turn and talk to their talk partners about their ideas, and then share several ideas with the whole class. "He looks scared and surprised in the picture," they may say.

Continue reading, stopping occasionally to ask the children to notice how the townspeople become more and more frightened as the town is filled with more and more color. Stop on the page where Ned makes a decision to seek the source of the color. "We can't spend our lives hiding in here," one of the townspeople says on the previous page. Read the following out loud:

The mysterious light appeared. Some people ran back inside the hotel, but Ned Hardy just stared at the strange light without blinking an eye.

Ask your students to turn and talk about Ned's change. Why has he suddenly become so brave? What happened to change his feelings? How can you tell his feelings have changed?

Tell your students that during their independent reading time they will be paying attention to how the feelings of the characters in their books change as they read. Tell them that as they read alone they will be paying attention to these things so that they can talk about them with their reading partners later.

Reading Time:

As your students read independently, confer with them about the changing feelings of the characters. When you stop them and move them into their reading partnerships, ask them to share their findings with each other.

Share:

Have one partnership reenact their conversation for the whole class. Have them take turns telling each other how their characters have changed and why.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Readers:

- More experienced readers will be able to work with more independence in small groups. This lesson would work beautifully with older readers who are engaged in a serious book club study, for example. Children could be reading independently for part of their work time, and then discussing as a group what they have noticed about the way characters' feelings changed as they read. They can also take the discussion a step further and talk about how the characters' feelings change across different books in the series they are studying.
- More experienced readers can be asked to record their thinking on paper in preparation for their conversations with their partners or clubs. You can ask them to put a sticky note in a place in the book where they notice the characters' feelings are changing so that they are prepared to back up their thinking with evidence from the book.

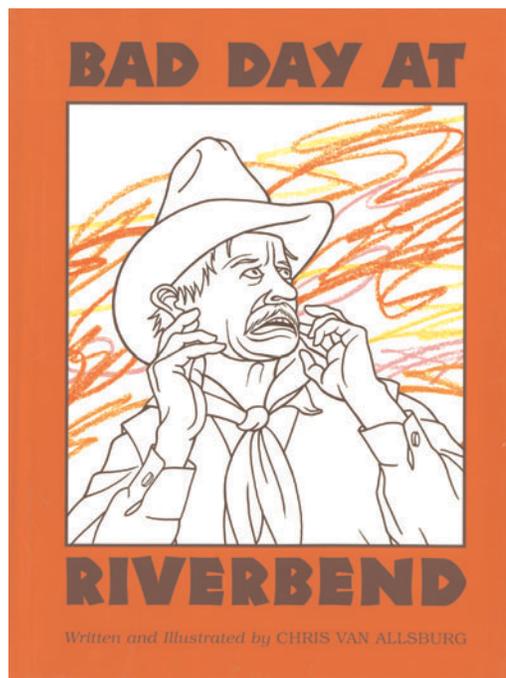
Expanding this lesson:

- Have your students make character webs describing the main characters in the books they are reading independently.

- Have your students work collaboratively to create a presentation about a character from the books they are reading (this will necessitate having partnerships read the same books). Students may create character webs, sketches, and charts to show how their characters change and grow throughout the book.

Just for Fun

- Think of one of your favorite coloring books. Imagine that the characters are as alive as Sheriff Hardy and the townsfolk of Riverbend. Write a story about their adventures.
- Imagine that instead of fearing the color appearing in their town, Sheriff Hardy and the townspeople grow to like it. Rewrite the story.
- Make a coloring book of your own. What is the theme? Who are the characters?
- Discuss with your class the relative benefits/drawbacks of coloring books when compared to drawing freehand.



Bad Day at Riverbend (1986)

- ALA Notable Book for Children

"It's a book that starts with one point of view and steps into another. The average bildungsroman accomplishes this kind of transition in several hundred pages: Van Allsburg does it in thirty-two."

— *Kirkus Reviews*, starred review