

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO
THE WRETCHED STONE

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Book Summary

The *Wretched Stone* begins with a notice reading: “Excerpts from the log of the Rita Ann. Randall Ethan Hope, Captain.” We read, then, the captain’s record of an extraordinary journey. The captain writes about loading supplies onto the ship at the start of the voyage, and the fine crew that has been assembled by first mate Mr. Howard. He notes that many of the men are avid readers, musicians, and storytellers, and as the voyage is under way, they are able to entertain themselves wonderfully.

The captain records the sighting of an uncharted island and decides to disembark with his crew to look for fruit and fresh water. Then he records their sojourn into the island’s interior. He describes lush vegetation that bears no fruit, bitter water, and an overpowering sickly sweet smell. He also describes an object the crew found and brought aboard: a gray rock with one smooth and glowing surface. As the crew sets sail again, the captain describes their fascination with the stone. All they seem to do is sit and stare into it. Soon the captain notes that something is wrong with the crew—they do not speak or play their instruments anymore. He believes they may have contracted some sort of fever from the stone, and he plans to throw it overboard. The next day he wakes to find that the crewmembers have locked themselves into the hold with the stone. A storm approaches, and the captain is fearful—how will he sail the ship alone? He pounds on the door of the hold until finally it swings open. He is horrified to find that each member of his crew has turned into an ape.

The next entry records that the storm has passed, though both masts and the ship’s rudder are lost. The mysterious stone has gone dark. The men are still apes. As the boat drifts and waits for rescue, the captain discovers that playing the violin and reading to the crew has a positive effect. Discovering that the stone has begun to glow again, he covers it up. He soon reports that the men have returned to normal; those among them who knew how to read return most quickly to their natural forms.

The final entries record that the captain and crew have been rescued. The captain decides to burn the boat and sink it and the stone to the bottom of the sea and not to talk about the strange events with anyone. The crew, he reports, is back to normal—except for one thing: an unnatural appetite for bananas.

Special Features

Children will quickly notice *The Wretched Stone*’s unusual structure. Instead of being written like a traditional narrative, the story is

laid out in the form of entries into the captain’s logbook. Readers experience the drama of the crew’s transformation through the confused and terrified eyes of the captain himself. It is fun to look at how Chris Van Allsburg dates the captain’s entries and how the tone of the entries changes to reflect the captain’s changing circumstances and mood as the stone begins to affect the crew.

The content of the story is unusual, as well. We are never told what the stone is, how it came to be, or why it has such an extraordinary power over those who spend time with it. “Why monkeys?” we ask ourselves. Why is it that crewmembers that know how to read are more quickly transformed back into humans? The stone could be a metaphor for *television* in many ways—a glowing object that draws humans to stare at it for hours at a time and shuts down (or just doesn’t make use of) creative parts of the brain:

It is a rock, approximately two feet across. It is roughly textured, gray in color, but a portion of it is flat and smooth as glass. From this surface comes a glowing light that is quite beautiful and pleasing to look at.

The crewmembers first stop reading, playing music, dancing, and working, and then finally become monkeys that simply gather around the stone and stare. The eerie light reflects off the blank faces of the monkeys like the flickering light from a television. When the stone is destroyed, the crewmembers slowly come back to their senses—those who can read are perhaps more able to quickly begin flexing the creative muscles of their mind again, and thus return to their original form. Whether the stone is an exact metaphor for television or simply invented to describe how people can be lured away from the creative activities that bring joy and energy to life, *The Wretched Stone* provides an excellent forum for discussing these ideas with young people.

Find Fritz

Fritz appears as just a tail near the leg of a sailor-turned-ape in the hold of the ship.



Summary of Teaching Ideas

The unusual structure of the book provides a wonderful opportunity to teach young writers about how a story can be told through letters, journal entries, or, as is the case in *The Wretched Stone*, entries in a logbook. If you are studying historical fiction in writing workshop, or if you are studying any historical period in social studies, you can use this book as a model for children who are writing historical journal entries (for example, children studying the American pioneers' westward journey on the Oregon Trail might write a series of journal entries describing the trip). Writing in journal or letterform gives us an unusual understanding of the character's voice. When we write in the third person, we are often describing our characters from the outside. Writing journal entries immediately helps the writer get into the mind of the character. When we write in letterform, not only are we inside the mind of the character, but we are aiming that character's emotion and thought at another specific character.

Younger children will benefit from examining the book as readers as well—piecing together the information provided by the captain's spare logbook entries will help them understand all of the mind work that readers do on their own—and how exciting it can be to create the world of the book in our minds in order to form opinions and make sense of the story.

Whether you choose to approach the stone as a direct metaphor for television or not, the book can fit beautifully into a discussion about the relative benefits/drawbacks of television and reading.

Guiding Questions for *A Wretched Stone* Read-Aloud

- What do you notice about how the story is being told? What is different about reading journal entries as opposed to hearing the story told in the third person?
- What do you think this stone is? Does the description remind you of anything? Why did the men bring the stone onboard?
- What is happening to the crewmembers? Why aren't they reading or dancing anymore?
- Why have the crewmembers turned into monkeys?
- Why do you think the crewmembers that knew how to read recovered most quickly?

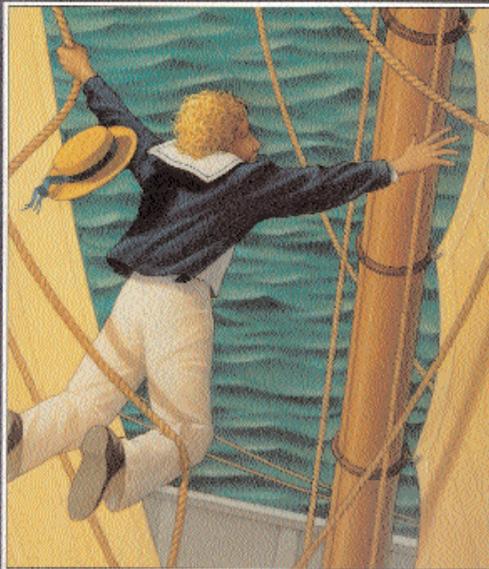
Telling a Historical Story Through Journal Entries

An upper grade writing lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Wretched Stone*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector
- Markers/overhead pens
- Writing paper and pencils/pens for each student

The Wretched Stone



WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG

Background Knowledge:

This lesson assumes that your class is in the midst of a social studies investigation focusing around some historical period. You may present the lesson without being engaged in such an investigation, but you will need to provide your students with more support in both choosing a historical period to write about and in learning historical facts to include. You will want to set aside several periods of class time for this project, as telling a story through journal entries necessitates several journal entries, which will take more than one class period to write. Children should be familiar with the book *The Wretched Stone*.

Introduction:

Tell your students as they gather around you in a central meeting area that you will be studying the way Chris Van Allsburg tells a story through journal entries in the

book *The Wretched Stone*, and then trying out the process themselves in the context of whichever historical period your class has been investigating.

Teaching:

Open the book and read the first page. Turning the book to face your students, ask them what they notice about the way the text is arranged on the page. They will likely notice that the entries are dated and that they are relatively brief. You may need to push them to notice that the entries are all in the first person, in the voice of the captain. You may want to point out that a captain on a ship would not be likely to have a lot of time to write, hence the brevity of the entries. You can record what your students notice about the page's organization on a piece of chart paper or an overhead.

As you read through the book, stop occasionally and draw your students' attention to how as the days progress the captain's feelings change because the stone begins to have power over his crew. When telling a story through journal entries, the voice of the narrator often changes as the entries move through time as a result of events described.

Collect a list of all that students notice about the entries. Tell them that when they go off, they will begin a project in which they will be writing several journal entries as though they lived during the historical period that you are studying in social studies. Tell them they will need to imagine themselves in that time period and include things they have learned about the way life was then, as well as including the things they have noticed about structure through studying *The Wretched Stone* (for example, dating the entries).

Writing Time:

Because this is the beginning of a project that will take several days, children may need a bit of extra time to think through how they will begin. As you confer with them individually, you will want to help them follow the structure of journal entries that you have noticed together during the lessons and make sure that they are including historically accurate facts.

Share:

Choose a student or students to share what they have written. Ask the others to pay attention to details that indicate that this story takes place in the past (what historical facts are included?) and is written in journal form.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Writers:

- As is often the case when teaching more sophisticated ideas to less experienced writers, it can be quite helpful to undertake an activity as a whole class as opposed to sending children off to try the activity alone. Younger children will be able to understand the concept of telling a story through letters or journal entries but may find it more difficult to undertake the process by themselves. You may do this as a daily group exercise, eliciting ideas from the children and recording them yourself on chart paper.
- You may simply want to use the book to teach younger writers how to write a dated journal entry. They will be able to try this out on their own.

Expanding This Lesson:

- This lesson is designed to be expanded across several days' worth of class time, as students will need more than one day to write enough entries to be able to tell a story across time. Each day you may want to focus on a different aspect of the process in your lesson—for example, one day you may focus on developing a distinct voice for your character. Another day you may focus on moving through time. Another lesson may focus on how to incorporate historically accurate facts into a fictional journal entry. You will then want to help children continue through the writing process so that they are able to revise and edit what they have written.

Symbolism in The Wretched Stone

A lower grade read-aloud lesson

What You'll Need:

A copy of *The Wretched Stone*

Background Knowledge:

This lesson can be presented as a read-aloud within the context of either a reading or writing workshop, but it can also stand on its own. It is helpful if children are used to being read to and to discussing books as a whole class. You will want to organize your students into talk partnerships so they are able to turn and talk to each other when you ask them questions about the text.

**Introduction:**

Tell your students that you will be reading *The Wretched Stone* out loud to them and talking about how sometimes authors write about one problem in order to help us think about another real-world problem. Tell them that Chris Van Allsburg does this in *The Wretched Stone*. First, ask your students to look at the front cover. What do they notice? What do they think the book might be about?

Reading/Discussion Time:

As you read the book, you will want to stop often to make sure that your students comprehend the basic storyline before you begin discussing the symbolism of the stone. You will want to help them notice the journal entry format of the book, but this is not the focus of the discussion, so don't spend a great deal of time exploring the idea. When you get to the page that contains the following description, stop and ask the children to turn and talk to each other about what familiar object the description reminds them of.

It is a rock, approximately two feet across. It is roughly textured, gray in color, but a portion of it is flat and smooth as glass. From this surface comes a glowing light that is quite beautiful and pleasing to look at.

Have students share their ideas. While it is likely that someone will think of a television, if your students do not, you may help them out.

As you read about the crew's transformation, tell your students that sometimes authors tell one story to represent another story. Ask your students, "How is what is happening to the crew similar to what happens when people watch a lot of television?" This is another good place for them to turn and talk to each other. When students are given time to talk in pairs, every child is given a chance to share his or her thinking. As they talk, you may want to leave your chair and listen in on their conversations. This way, you are able to bring out aspects of the conversation that will be useful to students' comprehension. For example, when you bring the class back together, you may mention, "I heard Talia saying that when people watch TV they just sit there and do nothing so they aren't getting any exercise—just like the crew members who are standing and staring at the stone."

As you read on, another point where you will want to have students turn and talk to each other is when the crew is returning to normal and Van Allsburg writes, "It seems that those who knew how to read recovered most quickly." Ask them why they think this might be so.

You may continue the conversation as long as your students are able to sustain it. At the end, you will want to reinforce that authors sometimes tell one story to help us understand another story or issue—just like Chris Van Allsburg did when he wrote the story of the stone.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Learners:

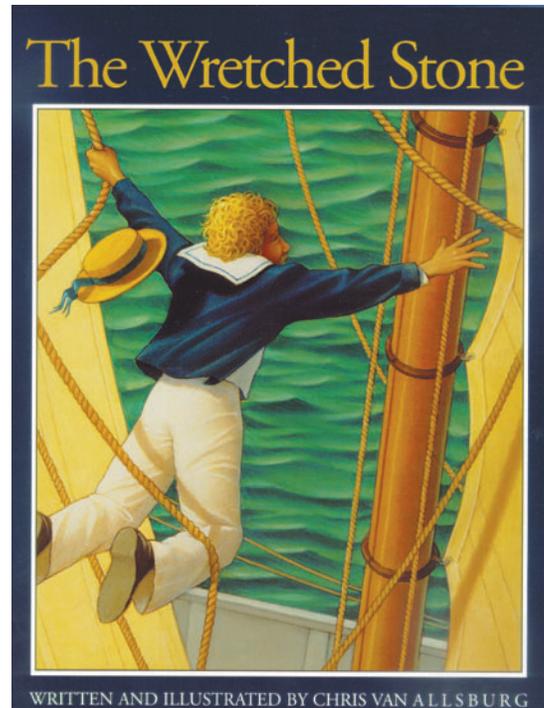
- More experienced writers will benefit from a read-aloud discussion of this book as well—they will simply bring a deeper level of understanding and insight to the discussions and will need less support from you.
- You may want to encourage more sophisticated writers to try explaining a social issue that they are concerned about in story form.

Expanding this lesson:

- Have students write their own feelings about the phenomenon of children watching a lot of television. What are the benefits of television? What are the drawbacks?

Just for Fun:

- Read *The Wretched Stone* in the context of “Turn Off Your TV” week. Have your students think of other things that can be done instead of watching TV and write about them. Post “Turn Off Your TV” signs in the hallways of the school.
- Imagine that you are on a voyage across the sea. Write a log of your adventures like that captain did in *The Wretched Stone*.
- What happens to the stone? Does anybody find it again? Imagine the continuing adventures of the stone.



The Wretched Stone (1991)

- **IRA/CBC Children's Choice**

“As always, Van Allsburg’s paintings are magnificent. Cool, clear colors, boldly executed, and unusual perspective accentuate the story’s mystery.”

— *Booklist*