

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO
THE SWEETEST FIG

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Book Summary

Monsieur Bibot is a very fussy dentist with an ultra-tidy home who tolerates rather than cares for his sweet little dog, Marcel. One morning an old woman with a toothache appears on his doorstep without an appointment, begging Dr. Bibot for help. Only because he hopes to make extra money, Bibot decides to take care of her tooth. He pulls the tooth, telling her he will give her pills for the pain. The woman thanks him and tells him that while she cannot pay him in money, she will give him something better. She hands two figs to the dentist, telling him, “They can make your dreams come true.” Angrily, Bibot escorts her to the door, telling her she will have to do without the pain pills as they are only for paying customers.

Later, Bibot takes Marcel to the park, pulling roughly on his leash whenever the little dog tries to sniff and explore. Before bed, the dentist eats one of the old woman’s figs—the sweetest, he thinks, he has ever tasted. In the morning, Bibot drags Marcel down the stairs for his morning walk. As he walks down the sidewalk, he notices people staring at him. Catching sight of his reflection in a window, he sees that he is dressed only in his underwear! Bibot remembers that he had dreamed that very thing the night before. As he runs home, he sees the Eiffel Tower drooping over—just as it had in his dreams.

Understanding that the woman spoke the truth about the power of the figs, Bibot works on hypnotizing himself to dream he is the richest man on earth. Night after night, he dreams just that. Finally he decides he is ready to eat the second fig. Placing it on the table, he turns to get something, and little Marcel leaps up and eats the fig himself. Enraged, Bibot chases the dog around his apartment until Marcel takes refuge under the bed. When Bibot wakes up the next morning, he is amazed to find that he is not in his bed but under it. “Come to Marcel,” a voice says, as a hand reaches for him. All Bibot can do is bark.

Special Features

Once again, we are surprised and delighted by the blending of dreams with reality in Van Allsburg’s work. In *The Sweetest Fig*, Bibot’s dreams intrude into his daily reality in a particularly unpleasant way—first when he discovers himself in his underwear in front of a busy café, and next when the sturdy Eiffel Tower droops over like it’s made of supple clay! Van Allsburg has created in Monsieur Bibot a thoroughly unlikable character—he is fussy, unkind, and selfish. He won’t even carry his short-legged dog down the steep stairs

because he “hated to get Marcel’s white hairs on his beautiful blue suit.” We are reminded of fairy tales in which the rude sister or brother does not offer to help the old man or woman disguised as a beggar (who is actually a powerful sorcerer). Just as the rude sisters and brothers in fairy tales get their comeuppance, so does Monsieur Bibot. The lessons in this book provide ample opportunity for discussing with children the importance of being kind and generous. If Monsieur Bibot had been kinder to Marcel, Marcel might not have eaten his fig, or he might not have had the dream he had about Bibot. Monsieur Bibot had many chances to be nice but didn’t take any of them—so he ended up a dog. Perhaps as a dog he will learn the art of kindness; if he is lucky, Marcel will be a different kind of owner and will show him warmth and compassion.

It is wonderful to see Van Allsburg’s typically vivid and expressive illustration style take on Paris—both outdoors in the city and within Bibot’s spare Parisian apartment. You might want to discuss France with your students—familiarize them with Bastille Day and the Eiffel Tower and the expression “sacré bleu”—so these things aren’t confusing to them as you read.

Find Fritz:

Fritz is on the label of a bottle sitting on the counter in Bibot’s kitchen.

Summary of Teaching Ideas

In myths, legends, and fairy tales passed down from generation to generation since the beginning of storytelling, we often find a character who is unkind or selfish and is somehow taught a lesson as a result of his or her poor behavior—the sister who won’t help the beggar woman fetch water from the stream, the brother who won’t carry the old peddler’s load, etc. *The Sweetest Fig*, while definitely a unique and never-before-told story, resonates with these old tales. Monsieur Bibot is thoroughly selfish and unlikable—and is taught a lesson for it. Instead of agreeing to help the old woman simply because it is the kind thing to do, Bibot pulls her tooth thinking only of the money he will receive. When he receives not money but figs, he is enraged and denies the old woman the pills that will ease her pain. Through no one’s fault but his own, the magic of the figs works to punish him for his lack of empathy—both for the old woman and for his little dog, Marcel. You may choose to compare



this story in your class with fairy tales or legends. You may ask students to write a story that teaches a character a lesson for his or her bad behavior. In a reading workshop, you may want to examine how authors create characters we either like or dislike.

Another element of *The Sweetest Fig* is its surprise ending. We readers do not expect either that Marcel will eat the second fig or that he will dream he is a man and Bibot is a dog. This can be a powerful tool for students to use in their own stories—saving the surprise for the very end.

One more interesting idea to think about is the role of dreams in *The Sweetest Fig*. Bibot's first dream is one to which many people can relate. Appearing in public wearing nothing but underwear is a dream that many people have had in some form or another. While Bibot's dream of the bending Eiffel Tower is unique, many of us have dreamed of something strange occurring to familiar and ordinary objects. Asking students to write about their dreams can be a wonderful way to tap into the unique ideas the unconscious presents to us.

Guiding Questions for a *Sweetest Fig* Read-Aloud

- Why does Bibot *smile* when he tells the old woman her tooth must come out? What does this tell us about what kind of a person he is?
- Knowing what you know about Bibot's character, how do you think Marcel feels about him? What in the book makes you think that?
- Sometimes we talk about something good happening as a "dream come true." What is different about the dreams we have at night and the dreams we have during the day? Would you really want the things you dream at night to become real? Why or why not?
- Why does Bibot try to hypnotize himself to have the same dream every night? What is he trying to do?
- Did Marcel's dream come true? What was it? What kind of person do you think he will be? How do you think he might treat his dog Bibot?

Stories That Teach a Lesson

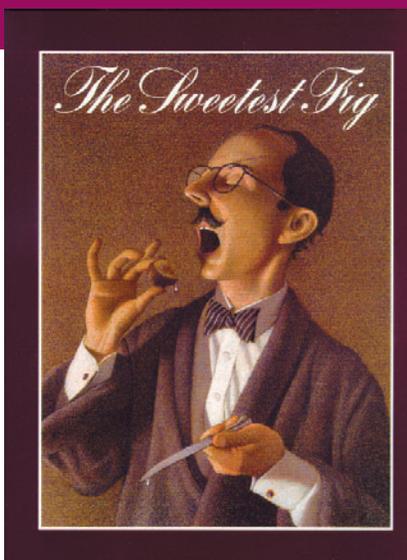
An upper-grade writing lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Sweetest Fig*
- Writing paper and pencils for the students

Background Knowledge:

You will want your students to be familiar with the ideas in *The Sweetest Fig* because you will be focusing on one particular aspect today—the lesson that Bibot is taught. Focusing on this one aspect will be easier and more fruitful if your students have already discussed the book in the context of a read-aloud before you present this lesson. This lesson can be presented in the context of a unit on writing fiction, fairy tales, or fables—but it works well on its own as well.



Introduction:

Tell your students that you will begin by discussing briefly how Chris Van Allsburg teaches Bibot a lesson in *The Sweetest Fig*, and that then they are going to have a chance to write stories in which a character is taught a lesson as well.

Teaching:

Begin with an informal discussion in which you talk with your students about what they think Monsieur Bibot is taught by his experience with the figs. This will need to involve a discussion of his character: What kind of a fellow is he? What kinds of things does he need to learn? Your students may say things like "He is mean," "He is selfish," "He is too particular," "He only thinks of himself." They might suggest that he needs to be taught how to think of others, how to be a good caretaker and friend to Marcel, how to

empathize, how to share, and so on. If your students need your support in coming up with ideas like these, feel free to interject.

Ask your students to think about what Mr. Van Allsburg does in the story to make sure Bibot learns his lesson—and why he chooses that particular device. You will want to guide your students toward the idea that Bibot is placed in a position where he is dependent on Marcel's kindness, just as Marcel was dependent on his. Hopefully, this will help him to become more empathetic and less selfish! Van Allsburg chooses a "punishment" for Bibot that fits exactly with what he needs to learn in order to be a kinder person (or rather, dog).

Tell your students that they will be writing stories like this, in which a character is taught a lesson for his or her poor behavior. They may use stories from their own experience, or they may completely make them up. Tell them that they may have more than one day to finish this process—it is a tricky one.

Writing Time:

During writing time, students should be writing independently. Confer with them individually. You may want to pay particular attention to making sure that the lesson their character is taught actually makes sense. You may also need to check to make sure that the characters' struggles are clear as well.

Share:

Share the work of a student who has written a story in which a character is taught a lesson.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Writers:

- Study this book in the context of other stories that teach a lesson.
- Write or tell a story that tells a lesson together as a class.

Expanding This Lesson:

- You may need to carry this work on over the course of several lessons so that your students have a chance to nurture and revise their work. Writing fable-like stories like these can be difficult.
- Collect the stories your class has written into a book. Share it with your school community.
- Have your students turn their stories into skits to be presented to the rest of the class.

Partnership Discussion: Why Do Readers Like or Dislike Characters?

A lower-grade reading lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Sweetest Fig*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector
- Markers/overhead pens
- Paper, pencils, and books for the students to read on their own

Background Knowledge:

This lesson works equally well whether or not students have previously been introduced to the book. It is helpful if they are working within the context of a reading workshop in which they are reading books independently each day chosen from a leveled classroom library, but the same lesson can be presented in the context of a basal reader as well. You will want, however, to organize your students into writing partnerships before beginning this lesson and ask them to sit next to their partners on the rug as you teach.

Introduction:

If you have not yet read the book to your students, do so now. Tell your students that one of the amazing things that authors do is write characters that are so easy for us to believe in that we actually begin to either like them or dislike them. In *The Sweetest Fig*, the character of Bibot is one about whom many readers develop strong feelings. Tell them that during the lesson, they will be talking about how Chris Van Allsburg creates characters about whom we readers have feelings. Later, in their independent reading work, they will be noticing how they feel about the characters in their own books and discussing this with their partners.

Teaching:

Ask your students how they feel about Bibot. Do they like him or dislike him? Why or why not? Most students will say they don't like him and will be quite willing to list a host of reasons for their feelings—he is mean to his dog, he only thinks of himself, he only helped the woman because he wanted her money, he is selfish, and so on. Tell them that whenever they are reading books with characters in them, it is important to pay attention to how we readers feel about the characters and why we feel that way.

As they go off to read on their own in their partnerships, ask them to keep in mind that you'll be asking them about whether or not they like their characters, and why.

Reading Time:

During reading time children should be sitting near their partners. They need not be reading the same book. As they read independently you will confer with them individually about how they feel about their characters and why.

Stop them midway through reading time and ask them to discuss with each other how they feel about the characters in their books, and what the authors are doing to make them feel that way. Listen in on several conversations during this time.

Share:

Ask a partnership whose conversation you heard to share their thinking with the class. It will be helpful if you choose children who can model not only the thinking work you asked them to do about their characters but also how to talk and listen to each other in a respectful way.



Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Readers:

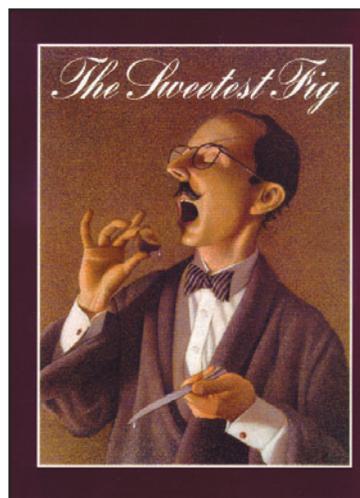
- More experienced readers will be able to go into more depth about *how* Van Allsburg creates his characters as likable or unlikable people. Ask them to notice and discuss more specifically what the authors do in their independent reading to give readers a feeling about their characters.
- More experienced readers will be able to handle having this sort of discussion in the context of book clubs. You can organize your students into groups of four or five and ask them to discuss together how the authors of their books create likeable or unlikable characters.
- How does this lesson transfer into students' own writing? Ask them to pay attention to what they can do in their writing to create characters about whom readers will have feelings.

Expanding This Lesson:

- This lesson could be presented in the context of a study of the story elements. Spend several more lessons discussing character, and then move on to discussions of plot, movement through time, and setting. What does Van Allsburg do in his writing to create each story element? How do the story elements work together?
- Ask each student to write a character description of one of the characters in the book he or she is reading independently.

Just for Fun

- What would happen if you were given magic figs that made your dreams become real—what would you do?
- Imagine you and your pet (or an animal you know) switched bodies—what would happen? Write about it.



The Sweetest Fig

ALA Notable Book for Children
Booklist Editors' Choice

School Library Journal, Best Books of the Year

★ "Van Allsburg swings back into his most mystifying mode with this enigmatic, visually sophisticated tale . . . A significant achievement." —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review