

James Whitcomb Riley: Young Poet

Teacher's Guide

Introduction

This Teacher's Guide provides a framework for using *James Whitcomb Riley: Young Poet* in the classroom as a vehicle to engage students and weave literature into multiple content areas.

The Guide offers many suggestions for interdisciplinary activities that students can do before, during, and after they read the book. These learner-centered activities help students move from solely a comprehension, or knowledge-based way of thinking about historical fiction, to higher levels of critical thought that include analysis and evaluation.

Before Reading

1. Before starting any unit of study, it's a good idea to assess what students already know, or think they know about the subject. If students have at least some knowledge of Riley or his poetry, draw a three-column chart on the blackboard with the headings: *What We Know About James Whitcomb Riley*, *What We Want to Know*, and *What We Learned*.

Ask students to respond only to the first two columns. After reading the book and doing some or all of the After Reading activities, revisit the chart with the class to complete the third column (*What We Learned*) and to correct any erroneous information in the first column.

2. If students have no knowledge of Riley or his accomplishments, you can have them begin reading the book without any prior discussion, or you can review the historical timeframe of the book, including such events as the Westward Movement and start of the Civil War.

During Reading

While many teachers prefer that students read a book without interruption, others opt to conduct mini-assessments along the way.

1. Have students keep an ongoing literature journal where they can write about what they're reading and keep an ongoing vocabulary list of unfamiliar words or phrases. You might also wish to provide writing prompts to help students think about what they're reading and to make connections to their own lives. Example of writing prompts:

- What are some of Bud's qualities, or personality traits, that you think helped to shape who he became as an adult? (Students might identify such traits as imagination, creativity, and playfulness.) What personality traits did he have that you didn't like? Why? What are some of YOUR best qualities, or traits of which you are most proud?
 - In Chapter 7, Bud feels ashamed for making fun of somebody, even though he didn't mean to. Have you ever hurt somebody's feelings without meaning to or done something that had a different outcome than you intended?
 - James Whitcomb Riley became known as "The Children's Poet." Why do you think that was? What kinds of poetry would you expect from a "Children's Poet?" Do you have a favorite poet? If so, what is it that you like about his or her poems?
2. As students read the book, be sure to keep a map of the United States posted so that they can identify each city and state mentioned.
 3. As they read, have students identify figures of speech (e.g., metaphors and similes), phrases of alliteration, analogies, and language of the time period.

After Reading

Historical fiction provides wonderful opportunities to weave and blend literature into many different content areas in meaningful ways. Following are a handful of ways for you to integrate a study of James Whitcomb Riley in your classroom. Although they are organized by content areas, we encourage you to move across content lines to blend them in natural ways AND to encourage your students to conduct further research on any specific topics of interest.

Assessment: All of the activities can be assessed in traditional ways (i.e., with quizzes and letter grading systems) to determine how well students can memorize and can recount facts. However, since these activities are rooted in discovery, discussion, communication, and collaboration, they lend themselves to more holistic types of assessment that measure achievement of academic skills, behaviors, and even social/emotional growth. We encourage you to use one or more of the following alternative assessments as students complete the activities.

- **Portfolios**—Keep one portfolio of work for each student to measure progress over a specific period of time. Portfolios are a great aid for both student/teacher and parent/teacher conferences. Encourage students to participate in selecting samples of writing, artwork, research notes, etc. to be included in their portfolios.

- **Rubrics**— Create a rubric, or chart (with or without grades or a numerical grading scale) to assess whether or not students have met specific standards and learning goals that you have previously identified.
- **Self-Assessment**—Hold regular teacher/student interviews to listen to students evaluate their own progress and skills.
- **Peer-Assessment**—Have students give and receive constructive feedback to assess such things as collaborative group work and to critique writing.
- **Anecdotal Notes**—As students work individually or in teams, make informal observations of how they solve problems, think critically, conduct research, work with others, and synthesize newly learned information. Add your notes to students' portfolios and share them during parent/teacher conferences.

Language Arts Connections

1. Take some time to review Riley's early poems, scattered throughout the book. Discuss the language of the time period as well as the unusual spellings of certain words. Students can create a chart in their literature journals to compare the spellings of words, yesterday and today.
2. Bud loved to make up rhymes about common occurrences. Have students write original limericks about everyday school events.
3. Bud enjoyed watching people and things passing by National Road. Have students spend some time on the school yard or ask them to make observations at home and write descriptive pieces about what they see.
4. Bud's mother makes up imaginary stories about how things work, such as fairies making the pot lid jiggle. Have students write their own creative stories about how something works or how it came to be. For example, they might write about why the school bell rings, why chalk breaks, or how the wind blows.
5. Have the class participate in a choral reading of a favorite Riley poem.

Social Studies Connections

1. Have students work individually or in pairs to complete the **WebQuest** by following links to gather information about Riley's life and poetry so that they can write their own poems to be compiled into a class book.

Encourage students to explore all parts of each site and to review the book. Discuss with the class how, as a child, Bud wrote poems about everyday occurrences, including such things as swimming, school recess, his trundle

bed, the circus, putting on a play, making a snowman, and people passing by his street.

Then, have each student write at least one poem about one ordinary event, object, person, or place—in school or at home. When all poems are complete, students can illustrate them and compile them into a class book. Make copies to share with parents. If desired, have students memorize and recite their poems for other classes during a Poet's Day.

2. The book mentions the period of the Westward Movement, when pioneer families moved west in Conestoga wagons, as well as the start of the Civil War. Divide students into teams to learn more about these periods in our history and then present their research to the class in oral reports, skits, or multimedia presentations.
3. In Chapter 11, Bud learns about the Underground Railroad. Have students learn more about the Railroad and slavery through the actual words of slaves at the **Library of Congress American Memory** site (<http://memory.loc.gov>). Click Search, then scroll down to **African-American Pamphlets Collection 1824-1909**. Older students might also want to check the Slave Narratives—Federal Writer's Project Collection. (See Arts Connections for more.)
4. Students can create Venn diagrams (two or three interlocking circles) to compare such things as travel, mail, foods, and general lifestyles of Bud's and their own.

Science Connections

1. Throughout the book, the author uses descriptive writing to describe specific seasons, without actually naming the season. Have students make a chart, divided into 4 columns. Label columns: winter, spring, summer, autumn. Under each heading, write words, phrases, or images the author describes to the reader. Then conduct research on seasons throughout the United States. Why is that only some places receive snow in winter or heavy rains in spring? What does the rotation of the Earth and its position in respect to the sun have to do with seasons?
2. Bud makes "soda" for his store by mixing sugar water with vinegar and a pinch of baking soda. Have students mix and sample his recipe to see if they think it tastes like the soda they know. Ask students what they think causes the "fizziness." (When baking soda and vinegar are mixed together, a chemical action releases carbon dioxide, a colorless and odorless gas. That chemical action is the cause of the fizz.) Students can also produce carbon dioxide by mixing yeast with sugar and water or by dropping an antacid tablet into a glass of water. The bubbles produced are carbon dioxide.

3. Bud's mother dries vegetables and cans fruit. Invite the class to dry and sample slices of different fruits and vegetables. Research the science behind dehydration. Weigh fruit before and after drying it.
4. The book describes details of some of the trees growing around Bud's childhood homes. These include cherry, apple, willow, sycamore, and locust trees. Invite students to take a nature walk in or around school grounds to sketch and make note of trees and flowers growing in the region.

Mathematics Connections

1. Develop math skills through cooking by having students make recipes of the time period, including baking breads, cakes, and biscuits or canning fruits, making jams and jellies. (Traditional recipes are readily available in books and on the Internet.)
2. Students can open their own store or trading center, similar to Bud's, by selling original crafts or school supplies.
3. Students can develop measuring skills by drawing a life-size mural of a Conestoga wagon.
4. Bud is fascinated by families moving west in covered wagons. Have students research to learn more about the kinds of supplies pioneers brought with them. Have students determine how many supplies one could really bring on a wagon by evaluating the approximate weight of each. Add that to the weight and space taken up by family members on the wagon.

Arts Connections

1. Using tongue depressors or ice cream sticks and other readily available craft materials, students can create models of Bud's log house or examples of early transportation in the book, including stagecoaches and horsecars on tracks. Have students build their models using the book's descriptions as their guide. They might also want to conduct additional research in the library or on the Internet to find illustrations.
2. Put on a class talent show similar to Bud's Barn Show.
3. After learning more about the Underground Railroad (see Social Studies Connections), have students learn and sing "Follow the Drinking Gourd," a song sung by slaves escaping north. Take some time to review and interpret the lyrics, line by line. **NASA's** Web site

(<http://quest.arc.nasa.gov/lrc/special/mlk/gourd2.html>) presents the song lyrics with explanations.

4. Bud hears drums and fifes being played as soldiers leave for the war. Fifes are high-pitched flutes. Students can make their own flutes with drinking straws, bamboo, or other materials. (Instructions are available in many books.)