



EDUCATORS GUIDE

# Whittington



ALAN ARMSTRONG

*Illustrated by S. D. Schindler*

GRADES 3-7

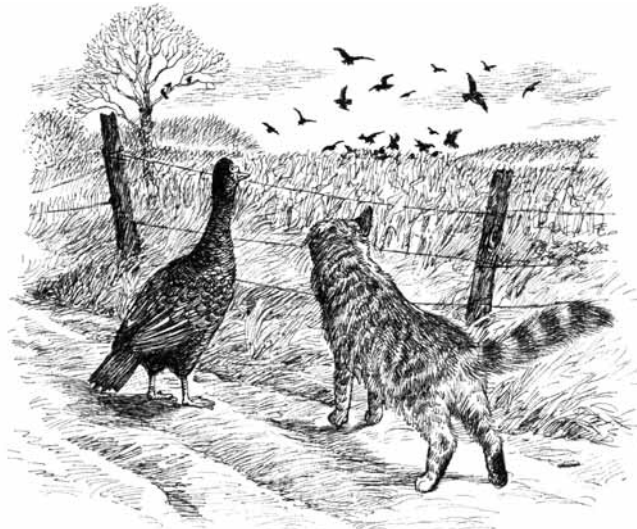
## themes

---

Family • Abandonment • Courage • Love  
Decision-Making • Independence • Loneliness

## curriculum connections

Language Arts • Social Studies • Science • Theater



G1

Illustrations © 2005 by S. D. Schindler.



---

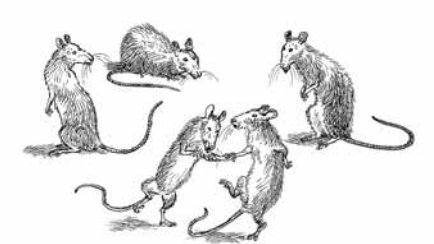
## about the book

---

Ten-year-old Abby and eight-year-old Ben live with their grandparents, Bernie and Marion, near a dilapidated New England farm with a barn that is home to a menagerie of old, run-down animals. Just when the barn seems to have reached capacity, Whittington, a homeless cat, asks for admission. He looks bad, but he is a good storyteller. The story of his ancestry and how he got his name intrigues the animals. As Whittington unfolds a tale of long ago, the animals devise a plan to help Ben, who is dyslexic, deal with his problems with reading. By his side are Abby, his grandparents, and a reading coach, who is willing to help him over the summer. But Ben's real courage comes from hearing the legendary story of Dick Whittington and his cat, so beautifully told by Whittington, the newest member of Bernie's barn.

## pre-reading activity

Engage the class in a discussion about the elements and characteristics of a legend. Ask students to use books in the library or sites on the Internet to find the real story of Dick Whittington. Have them share their stories, and indicate their sources, in class. Are there variations to the Dick Whittington stories? Why is the story of Dick Whittington considered a legend?



## vocabulary/ use of language

There are some challenging words and phrases in the story that contribute to the strong literary quality of the novel. Such words and phrases that students may want to notice as they read the novel include: *obsidian eye* (p. 2), *moored dory* (p. 5), *preen* (p. 8), *paddock* (p. 11), *farrier* (p. 12), *chiropractory* (p. 30), *luxuriance* (p. 31), *inaudible* (p. 37), *audacity* (p. 60), *presumption* (p. 60), *livery* (p. 65), *waybills* (p. 68), *cartage* (p. 68), *stanchion* (p. 73), *sashay* (p. 121), *diabolical* (p. 140), *discreet* (p. 149), and *caravel* (p. 170). Ask students to identify words that refer specifically to barn life, and those that are related to medieval life. Students may attempt to define words, taking clues from the context of the story.

## thematic connections

### questions for group discussions

---

**Family**—Define *family*. Ben and Abby don't live in a traditional family, but nonetheless, they do belong to a family. Who are the members of their family? Describe the sense of family in Bernie's barn. Explain each animal's purpose in the barn family. Which animal is the head of the family? How is he/she qualified for this position? Discuss how the animals decide who to admit to their family. How does the barn family help Ben?

**Abandonment**—Ben and Abby's mother is dead, and their father left them with their grandparents. Contrast their feelings of abandonment to that of Whittington, the cat. Marion seems to know how to help Abby, but Ben's despair seems to frighten Bernie and Marion. Why are Ben's emotions more complicated?

**Courage**—Dick Whittington has a lot of courage. How does he find courage by reading about Marco Polo's journeys? Describe Dick Whittington's most courageous moment. How does Dick Whittington's story give Ben courage? Which of the animals in Bernie's barn displays the most courage?

**Love**—Define love from Dick Whittington's point of view. How do Bernie and Marion demonstrate love to their grandchildren? Describe Bernie's love for animals, especially broken ones. Why does Whittington, the cat, think that he was never loved? How do the horses help Abby and Ben better understand love?





**Decision-Making**—What is Dick Whittington's first difficult decision? Discuss the many decisions that he makes on his journeys. Which of his decisions might be considered life-changing? Why is it difficult for Ben to make a decision about going to Reading Recovery during the summer? How is his decision life-changing?

**Independence**—Describe Dick Whittington's independent nature. Bernie is described as someone who "liked making his own way." (p. 13) How is this a sign of independence? Explain the statement that Bernie's truck "smelled of independence." (p. 11) What does learning to read teach Ben about independence? Explain how it takes teamwork to help Ben gain his independence.

**Loneliness**—Bernie was especially lonely after his daughter died. How can one be independent and lonely? Ask students to discuss the difference between sadness and loneliness. How do the animals in the barn fill a void in Bernie's life? Cite scenes from Dick Whittington's story where he experienced loneliness. How did he take charge of his loneliness?

## connecting to the curriculum

---



**Language Arts**—Have students write and illustrate Whittington’s version of the legend of Dick Whittington as an easy reader so that Ben might be able to read it. Then encourage students to dedicate their books to a character in the novel. Ask them to share their dedication page in class and state why they chose that particular character.

Alan Armstrong uses figurative language in the novel to create certain images. For example, “When [Whittington] stood or sat, he rocked slightly from side to side like a punch-drunk fighter.” (p. 1) Find other examples of similes in the novel.

**Social Studies**—As a class use the map in the book to note Dick Whittington’s first and second voyages. Send Ben and Abby on a trip that retraces Dick Whittington’s travels. Make a travel brochure of sites that Abby and Ben might see on each voyage. Pick one of the sites, and make a postcard that Ben and Abby send to their grandparents.

Ben suffers from dyslexia, a disorder that causes someone to see letters and numbers backwards. He worries that his classmates will laugh at him because he needs special help. Invite a special education teacher to speak to the class about dyslexia. Ask the teacher to address the issue of labeling, and how such labeling interferes with the education of special needs students.

---

**Science**—A county agricultural agent gives Bernie a horse-care book. Brainstorm the kind of information that might be in the book that Bernie receives. As a class, develop a table of contents for the book. Divide the class into small groups, and assign each group a chapter to write. Bind the chapters into a book. Give the book an appropriate title.

**Theater**—Allow students to work in small groups to select a favorite chapter of the novel and write it as a one-act play. Use appropriate costumes or masks to distinguish the characters. Design a simple scene backdrop, and choose appropriate music to open and close the scene.



## about the author

---



**Alan Armstrong** started volunteering in a friend's bookshop when he was eight. At 14, he was selling books at Brentano's. As an adult, every so often, he takes to the road in a VW bus named Zora to peddle used books. He is the editor of *Forget Not Mee & My Garden*, a collection of the letters of Peter Collinson, the 18th-century mercer and amateur botanist. He lives with his wife, Martha, a painter, in Massachusetts.



Guide prepared by Pat Scales, retired Director of Library Services,  
SC Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities, Greenville.



## internet resources

### Gloucestershire Past, Present, and Future [www.softdata.co.uk/gloucester/dick.htm](http://www.softdata.co.uk/gloucester/dick.htm)

This site includes a time line of Dick Whittington's life.

### Long Long Time Ago: Stories for Children [www.longlongtimeago.com/llta\\_folktales\\_dickwhittington.html](http://www.longlongtimeago.com/llta_folktales_dickwhittington.html)

This story Web site for 8- to 800-year-olds includes the legend of Dick Whittington and his cat.

### The American Spice Trade Association [www.astaspice.org/history/frame\\_history.htm](http://www.astaspice.org/history/frame_history.htm)

A history of the spice trade is included on this site.

## related titles

### BY THEME

#### The Catlady

##### Dick King-Smith

Family • Love

Grades 2-5

Alfred A. Knopf hardcover:

978-0-375-82985-7 (0-375-82985-7)

GLB: 978-0-375-92985-4 (0-375-92985-1)



#### The Cricket in Times Square

##### George Selden

Family • Independence • Decision-Making

Grades 3-6

Yearling paperback:

978-0-440-41563-3 (0-440-41563-2)



#### Small Steps

##### Louis Sachar

Family • Courage • Love • Decision-Making

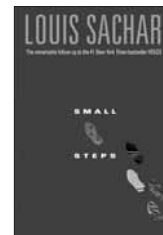
Grades 5 up

Delacorte Press hardcover:

978-0-385-73314-4 (0-385-73314-3)

GLB: 978-0-385-90333-2 (0-385-90333-2)

eBook: 978-0-375-84069-2 (0-375-84069-9)



🎧 = Listening Library audio available



## a conversation with alan armstrong

---

### CHILDHOOD

**Q: What were your early experiences with reading?**

A: I was sick a lot as a kid. I survived on stories. The best thing in the world was someone coming in to my room. I waited like a spider, book at the ready—something of the parents' that one of my brothers might read aloud: *Hornblower*; *Gone with the Wind*.

I remember the rush when I realized I could read on my own: I wasn't dependent any more: The world was mine! I walked home from school that afternoon saying to myself, "I can read! I CAN READ!" I looked down. I was floating.

**Q: What were some of your favorite books during your childhood?**

A: I liked books about kids put to it like Dick Whittington: Kipling's *Captains Courageous* and *Kim*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, a Depression-era story called *Model-T Tommy*. My father was a plantsman. He put me on to biographies of George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington and something he'd read as a boy, *Juan and Juanita*, about two kids stranded in the high desert and how they survived. I read over and over a book about an old farmer who took care of his animals every morning before the factory whistle called him away. And *Misty of Chincoteague* and E. B. White. I learned to read following my mother's finger as she read aloud *A Child's Garden of Verses*.

---

## ON WRITING

**Q: How did your interest in writing develop?**

A: From about age ten my dream was to make my own book. I wrote and wrote. I showed my efforts to a friend of my father's. She read them. "Write about what you like," she said. "We all know about the rest."

I got a place on the college newspaper. The editor was a tall, pimply boy in ruined clothes who said the only thing that mattered was getting a cleanly typed text in by the deadline. When I turned in my first piece, he shot it back with a note: "Write down quotes. Listen for verbs. The story's always in the verbs. Get the verbs down along with any odd words you hear, locutions. And questions. Readers like questions." I rewrote that piece four times. My average now is forty.

**Q: What is your writing routine?**

A: I carry a fold of paper and a ballpoint to scribble notes as things come to me. Ideas fly like birds; you have to catch them on the wing. I can't sit still for long, but everything added together on a good day I get in two hours in the morning, an hour in the afternoon, and an hour at night.

**Q: What advice would you give to aspiring young writers?**

A: Make notes when a surprise comes by. Every story starts with two or three words—catch them! Keep a journal. Be susceptible. If a book comes to your hand unbidden, look in it.

**Q: What do you hope your readers get from your writing?**

A: Pleasure. And maybe something they didn't know or feel before. I always wanted to be a teacher. I think it's the noblest profession.

---

**Q: What are you writing now?**

A: I am working on *Raleigh's Page*, the story of a page to Sir Walter Raleigh who assisted his studying the New World, went as his spy to France, and traveled as one of his adventurers to Virginia in 1585.

**ON WHITTINGTON**

**Q: Why did you choose to have animals play such a major part in the story? What do you think animals have to offer people?**

A: I chose to use animals because they spoke to me. I think that animals offer people knowledge of what really matters in life: true feeling, honesty, loyalty. Animals may trick and steal, but they don't lie.

**Q: What appealed to you about having cats as main characters?**

A: The stray that fell in love with our daughter Abby when she needed someone became part our family and its legend. His name was Bent Ear—the Bent Ear in *Whittington*.

**Q: Do you have any pets?**

A: I don't have any pets right now. I grew up with a dog named Jeep. We lived in the country. I was pretty much on my own. Jeep went everywhere with me, saved me once when I stumbled into a wasp nest and got stung senseless. He went for help. Right after we got married, a noble cat named Thomissa took us on—reached out a paw as I passed a pet shop in New Haven and said "Take me!" so I did, and for the next six years she gave good counsel. Then Bent Ear adopted Abby. When Abby was a little older, she met a wise and imaginative poodle named Jefe who became the hero of my novel, *Regards, Rodeo*. He was my partner in the book van I wrote about in *Off in Zora* and an inspiration in our family for fourteen years. I still miss him.



**Q: The present-day story takes place in and around a barn. Do you live on a farm, or have you spent time on one?**

A: We live in a farm community. Our home is on a hill above the barn in the story. We know its occupants and the man who takes care of them—Bernie in the story.

**Q: *Whittington* is earning comparisons to *Charlotte's Web*. Were you inspired by E. B. White's tale?**

A: Yes. I've read E. B. White all my life. He and his hero Henry Thoreau are two writers I admire.

**Q: Ben has dyslexia, and his sister and the animals try to help him overcome it and learn to read. Do you have any personal experience with dyslexia?**

A: Yes. My oldest brother was dyslexic, but it was never diagnosed as a disorder you could treat. Our son, Ben, had reading difficulties. A reading coach named Mrs. Hamilton saved him.

**Q: What is it about *Whittington* that you think will appeal most to readers?**

A: What appealed to me was telling how hard growing up is. Kids fight lonely battles, like Dick Whittington and Ben. They look for help on the way—Dick encountering Will Devlin, Fitzwarren, and Sir Louis Green, and Ben meeting Ms. O'Brien.

The logo features the word "Teachers" in a cursive font, followed by a stylized "@RANDOM" where the "a" is inside a circle. The background consists of several overlapping gray rectangular blocks.

The Ultimate Online Resource  
[www.randomhouse.com/teachers](http://www.randomhouse.com/teachers)

**Educators Guides**—over 250 guides developed by leading educators with thematic and curriculum connections.

**Author and Illustrator Biographies**—over 100 extensive biographies for author studies.

**Planning Calendar**—provides ideas and books for seasonal themes and special events.



Check out our Thematic Search  
and search for your books by

- Theme
- Grade
- Format

Search over 140 themes and holidays by format or grade level.  
Plus Educators Guides are only a click away!

These themes are the most commonly taught in today's schools  
and tie in directly to the K-12 curriculum.



An innovative program designed to enhance the partnership  
between teachers and retailers. To learn how you can get  
involved, visit [www.teachersatretail.com](http://www.teachersatretail.com)

INTRODUCING **Classroom**  
**CAST** 

RANDOM HOUSE  
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

COMING  
SPRING 2007

**Video Podcasting Program**



Photo Credit: Will Osborne

**MAGIC TREE HOUSE**  
Mary Pope Osborne



Photo Credit: Reel Marriot

**The Edge CHRONICLES**  
Paul Stewart  
Chris Riddell



**THE FIVE ANCESTORS**  
Jeff Stone



Photo Credit: Neil Davidson

**MAUDE MARCH**  
Audrey Coulombis

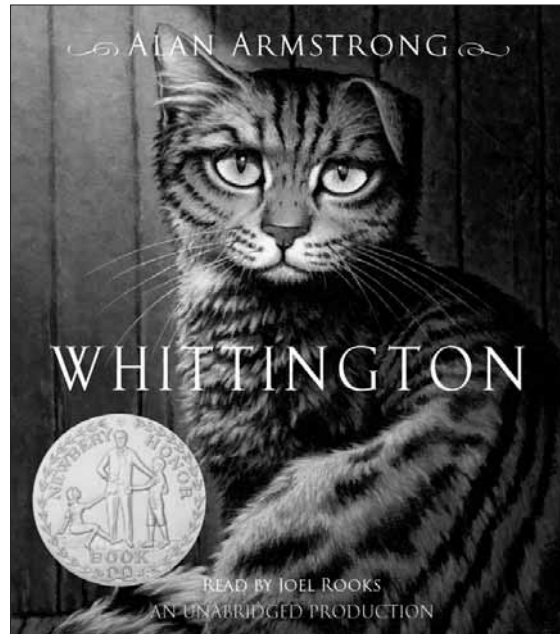
Random House Children's Books is delighted to introduce ClassroomCast—a new marketing initiative that will provide entertaining and curriculum-based videos for a classroom environment in support of leading Random House authors and series. ClassroomCast will serve as an essential resource for teachers who are looking for ways to bring multimedia into their lessons and bring literature to life! These videos will show the authors discussing their work, research, and how they go about writing their books.

And best of all—it's free! Log on to [www.rhbc classroomcast.com](http://www.rhbc classroomcast.com) for details! Look for additional downloadable resources for the classroom to support key lesson plans and get kids reading!

The participating authors in the launch of the ClassroomCast program will include Mary Pope Osborne, Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell, Jeff Stone, and Audrey Coulombis.



also available on audio



**Whittington**

by Alan Armstrong

\$30.00 • ISBN: 978-0-7393-3701-1(0-7393-3701-7)

Read by Joel Rooks, this production contains the complete text of the original work.

Listening Library, an imprint  
of the Random House Audio Publishing Group  
[www.listeninglibrary.com](http://www.listeninglibrary.com)