

## THE GARDEN OF ABDUL GASAZI

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



## Book Summary

When young Alan Mitz is asked to take care of Miss Hester's unruly dog Fritz while she visits cousin Eunice, he has no idea what adventures are in store for him. Fritz keeps Alan busy all morning by attempting to chew up Miss Hester's furniture. When the two both settle in for a nap, Alan makes sure to hide his hat from Fritz, who is known to love chewing hats above even furniture!

Later, Alan dutifully takes Fritz for his afternoon walk. Fritz leads the way across a little white bridge. Alan stops on the other side to read a sign that declares, "ABSOLUTELY, POSITIVELY NO DOGS ALLOWED IN THIS GARDEN," signed by the mysterious Abdul Gasazi, retired magician. Just as Alan turns to leave, Fritz breaks free and runs past the sign and through the door to Gasazi's garden. Alan chases Fritz deep into the garden. Slipping and falling, he loses sight of the little dog and must follow his prints along a path leading into a forest. Finally, Alan comes to a clearing and sees the massive home of Abdul Gasazi. Believing that the magician has captured Fritz, Alan bravely knocks on the door and is welcomed into Gasazi's home by the great man himself.

After apologizing and explaining his predicament to the magician, Alan asks for Fritz to be returned. Gasazi asks Alan to follow him outside, where they come upon a group of ducks. Expressing his dislike of dogs, the magician tells poor Alan that he has turned Fritz into one of the ducks. As Alan tearfully takes the duck that is Fritz into his arms and heads for home, a gust of wind blows his hat off of his head. The duck swoops up, catches it, and flies away into the distance. A miserable Alan walks back to Miss Hester's house only to learn from Miss Hester that Fritz was in fact waiting in the front yard when she returned from Eunice's. She tells Alan that the magician has simply played a trick on him. Relieved, Alan says goodbye and heads for home. After he leaves, Fritz trots up to Miss Hester with Alan's lost hat in his mouth! Was Gasazi playing a joke, or was Fritz *really* temporarily turned into a duck?!

## Special Features

Chris Van Allsburg began his career as an author and illustrator of children's books in full stride with his first book, *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*. From the very beginning of his writing life, Van Allsburg has been beguiling readers with stories that balance on the edge of fantasy and reality. Was Fritz really turned into a duck, or did he find Alan's hat by coincidence? We readers are allowed to decide for ourselves—although we are subtly encouraged to challenge the idea that we are never too old to believe in magic. "He was too old

to believe in magic," Van Allsburg writes of Alan as he walks home, feeling foolish about being "tricked" by Gasazi. But when Fritz drops Alan's hat at Miss Hester's feet, we are forced to reevaluate our ideas about what has happened. This is an important idea to teach young readers: we must always be on our toes, always asking ourselves to think through what is really going on in stories we read. The story also provides an interesting background for a discussion with children about responsibility. Throughout the book, Alan behaves utterly responsibly—doing his best to take care of Fritz and honestly approaching the frightening magician about what has happened.

Readers will be struck both by Van Allsburg's command of language and his ability to tell a story clearly and cleanly, yet with vivid description, and by the exquisite pencil drawings for which he is now well known. Each character is imbued with unique personality, and each scene is rendered to portray a specific mood—the eeriness of Gasazi's garden, the still gloominess of the magician's sitting room, the warmth of Miss Hester's house when Alan arrives to find that Fritz has already come home.

Van Allsburg does a wonderful job describing the character of Fritz the dog, whose mischief adds a great deal to the story. While Fritz is not what one might call a well-behaved dog, we fall in love with his "dogginess" as Van Allsburg describes how he loves to "chew on the chairs and shake the stuffing out of the pillows." His little nose poking out from below the sofa as he and Alan settle in for a nap endears us. While we are concerned for Alan when Fritz runs away into the magician's garden, we can't help but smile as we read how Fritz "barked with laughter as he galloped out of sight." It is difficult to describe the personality of a character that doesn't speak a word—but Van Allsburg has rendered Fritz into a distinct and very believable "doggy" character. He is so appealing that it is no surprise that Van Allsburg has chosen to hide this impish dog in each of the many children's books he has written since his debut with *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*.



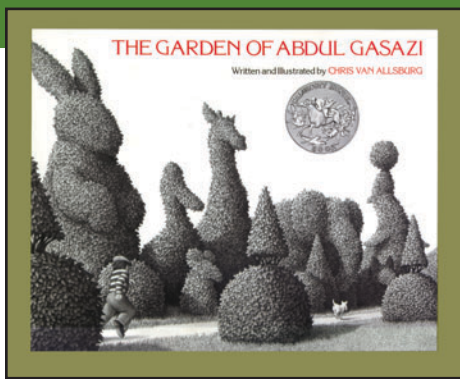
## Summary of Teaching Ideas

From the beginning of his career as a children's book author, Van Allsburg has been challenging readers to imagine a world in which everything may not be exactly as it seems. Mystery intrudes often into what we think of as "real life." It may be interesting to tackle this idea during a reading workshop with some of your experienced upper-grade readers. You might examine together how it is that Van Allsburg creates such mystery in his work. One strategy he uses is to thoroughly create a believable "normal" world, both with his illustrations and with his writing. When something strange begins to happen—such as Fritz being turned into a duck—he describes the event in the same detailed way. We readers begin to easily believe in situations and ideas that might seem far-fetched if Van Allsburg didn't so carefully and matter-of-factly describe them. Do your students know other books, either by Van Allsburg or other writers, that work in the same way?

Another wonderful teaching point that can be made using *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* is that readers might not always interpret the same text in the same way. Some children may wholeheartedly believe that Fritz was indeed turned into a duck by the magician. Some may believe just as strongly that it was only a joke, and that the appearance of Alan's hat in Fritz's mouth was sheer coincidence. You will want to teach your students the importance of finding evidence in the text that they can use to back up their theories. For example, a child who believes it was a trick might think that the duck simply happened to drop the hat as he flew, and Fritz happened to find it when he was running home on his own. Fritz could have picked the hat up from Miss Hester's yard, as well, since before he brings it to Miss Hester, he is "playfully running around the front yard."

Children will be interested in discussing (and perhaps trying out in their own writing) the ways in which Van Allsburg creates Fritz's personality without having him speak. What other methods can we use to describe a character besides dialogue? A detailed lesson plan for an investigation into creating believable non-speaking characters appears below.

Of course, it is always important to spend time discussing the "big ideas" of the text with your students. What deeper meaning was Van Allsburg expressing when he wrote this book? One interesting issue to think about is that of young Alan's sense of responsibility. Throughout the story, Alan does his best to keep Fritz out of trouble. Through no fault of his own, he doesn't completely succeed. Children may be interested in discussing situations in their own lives in which they have been responsible for taking care of something—either a pet or a task—and have had some sort of trouble. Exploring Alan's feelings may give them an opportunity to explore their own. Another, larger idea in the text is belief in magic, a theme that is echoed in many of Van Allsburg's more recent books as well. Children tend to believe more easily than adults in things for which they have no concrete proof. Alan easily believed that Fritz was a duck until Miss Hester told him the magician was only fooling. Why do adults tend to lose their openness to "magic"? These questions can provide for interesting class discussions.



## Guiding Questions for *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* Read-Aloud

- Why do you think Fritz breaks free of the leash to go into Gasazi's garden? Do you think he knows what he is doing?
- Why do you think Van Allsburg writes that Fritz "barked with laughter" as he ran away from Alan? Is he being mean spirited or just playful? How do you think Alan is feeling at that moment?

- When Alan tells Gasazi about his problem, stop before Gasazi answers and ask the children to predict whether or not they think he will help Alan get Fritz back. Then ask them what in the book makes you think that?
- Do you think Gasazi really turned Fritz into a duck, or was he, as Miss Hester said, playing a trick on Alan? What in the book makes you think that?

## Describing Characters without Dialogue

*An upper-grade writing lesson*

### What You'll Need:

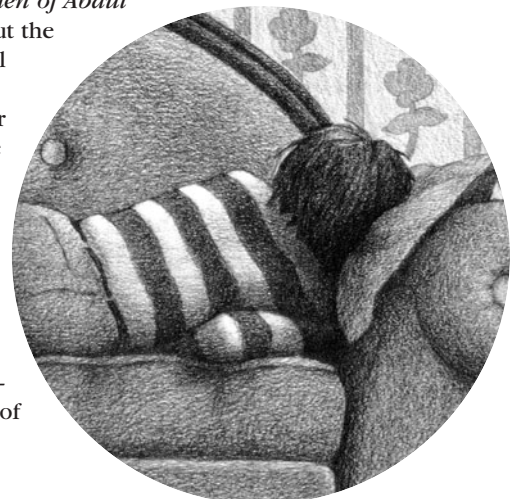
- A copy of *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*
- Writing paper and pencils for the students
- Chart paper or an overhead projector

### Background Knowledge:

This lesson fits well within the context of a writing workshop in which children write each day about topics of their own choosing. However, it can be easily presented as an independent writing project as well. It will be helpful if children are familiar with the elements of a story and have had some experience writing narratives of their own. You may want to read the book to the children on a separate occasion to familiarize them with the story.

### Introduction:

As your students gather around you in a central meeting area, tell them that they will be examining the way Chris Van Allsburg helps the character of Fritz come to life in the book *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*—all without the use of dialogue. Tell them you will be examining together how writers create living, breathing characters by describing their actions. Students will be creating their own characters and describing them thoroughly without the use of



dialogue. This is an easier and more logical process to undertake when describing an animal character—something that is quite common in the stories of youngsters, whether they are writing fiction or personal narrative—but it can be done with a human character as well, if necessary.

### Teaching:

Examine with your students how Van Allsburg creates a distinct character for Fritz the dog without Fritz uttering a word. You may want to start by eliciting observations from your students; they are likely to notice a great deal if they are already familiar with the story.

First you will want to make a list together, either on the overhead projector or on chart paper, of Fritz's qualities. Students may be likely to say things like "He bites," "He is mischievous," "He has his own mind," "He doesn't listen well." If they don't notice such things, you will want to point them in the right direction.

Next, you will want to examine how Van Allsburg gives readers this information about Fritz—who is, after all, a dog. Make another list describing what Van Allsburg does to teach us about Fritz's character without using words. You may need to provide students with support here and steer the conversation in the right direction. You will hope for students to notice that Van Allsburg describes *how other people react* to Fritz—cousin Eunice's letter to Miss Hester, for example, says, "P.S., Please leave your dog home." You will hope that they notice that Van Allsburg describes *how Fritz behaves*—"He loved to chew on the chairs and shake the stuffing out of the pillows." They may notice that Van Allsburg gives Fritz some *human-like characteristics*—"Fritz barked with laughter as he galloped out of sight."

Tell your students that when they are describing either animal characters or characters who don't speak, they can learn from Van Allsburg and describe how others react to their characters and how their characters behave, and (if their characters are animals) they can give them human-like characteristics, as Van Allsburg does with Fritz.

### Writing Time:

As your students go off to write individually, ask them to spend their writing time describing a character who does not speak. Tell them you will be checking to see if they are trying out any of the techniques Van Allsburg uses to describe Fritz in *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*.

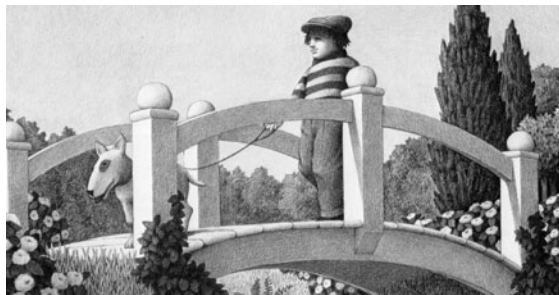
As your students work, confer with them individually about their character descriptions.

### Share:

Share the work of one or two students who have described characters using some of Van Allsburg's techniques. Discuss with the class how these students have brought their characters to life, even without words.

### Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Writers:

- Have students write stories about special animals in their lives.
- Have students write Fritz's continuing adventures.



### Expanding This Lesson:

- Expand the lesson to include dialogue. All of the techniques Van Allsburg uses to describe Fritz can also be used when describing any character. Make a chart of important things to keep in mind when writing character descriptions. Have students write character descriptions for all

characters in the stories they are working on.

- Have students write a complete story to go with the character they described in the original lesson.

### Readers Don't Always Agree

*A lower-grade read-aloud lesson*

#### What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*
- Chart paper labeled "Readers Don't Always Agree"

#### Background Knowledge:

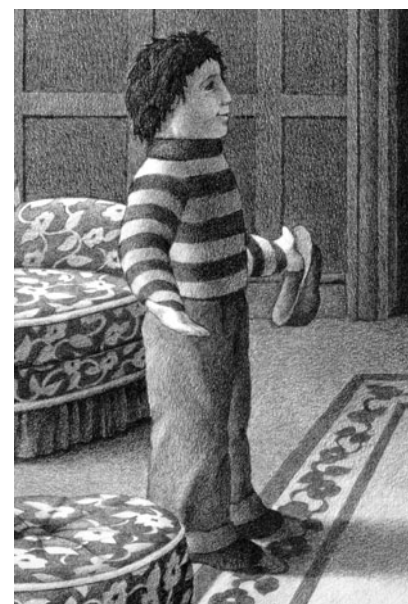
This lesson is focused around conversation that is developed during a read-aloud of the book *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*. The lesson should be equally successful whether your students have been exposed to the book before or not. It is helpful if your class is comfortable having whole-class discussions about books and if you have set up some ground rules about sharing ideas—for example, "one person speaks at a time." It is sometimes helpful to have kids call on one another, instead of always choosing who speaks yourself—this gives children a sense of ownership of the conversation and may help them to feel more invested in it.

#### Introduction:

Tell your students that you will be reading Chris Van Allsburg's book *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* to them, and that then the class will be discussing some of the big ideas in the book. "There may be things about which you don't all agree," you may tell them, "and that's all right. In fact, it's great when readers have different opinions when discussing books because it makes our conversations more interesting!"

#### Teaching:

Read the story to your students, who are gathered around you in your class's meeting area, sitting next to their reading partners. You may want to pause every so often to ask a quick comprehension question before you get into the main discussion at the end of the story. For example, you may stop and ask, "How do you think Alan feels when Fritz breaks free of the leash? How would you feel?" and



then ask your students to turn to their reading partners and talk about what they think. Let them discuss for two or three minutes before you come back together as a class and share a few ideas. This gives each child a chance to share his or her thinking out loud and encourages quieter children to feel more comfortable doing so. You may want to have your students “turn and talk” two times before getting to the main discussion. Tell them that it’s all right if they don’t agree with each other, because having different opinions makes reading even more interesting.

#### Discussion Time:

After you have finished reading the story, tell the students that you have something very important to discuss together. Ask them to think about whether or not they believe Fritz was really turned into a duck by the magician. Their responses will depend on your individual students, but in general some children will probably think yes and some children will probably think no. Ask them to share their thinking about this with the whole class, using evidence from the book to back up their opinions. Tell them that there is no one right answer—Mr. Van Allsburg has left it up to each reader to make his or her own decision. It is important for readers to be able to form strong opinions based on evidence from the book, and to be able to articulate those opinions out loud. You may need to help your children disagree without feeling upset—it can be hard for young children to understand that they can have differing opinions without one person being all right and one person being all wrong. You may want to make a chart to record what they say, with one side listing evidence for Fritz having been turned into a duck and the other side listing evidence for the magician having played a trick on Alan. You can label the chart “Readers Don’t Always Agree” and keep it posted in your room to refer to during other book discussions.

#### Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Readers:

Ask your students to carry this lesson’s guiding point (readers don’t always agree) into discussions they have with their partners during independent reading time. Ask them to notice the times they don’t agree with each other. Tell them that it is important to back up their opinions with evidence from their books, but that they may agree to disagree.

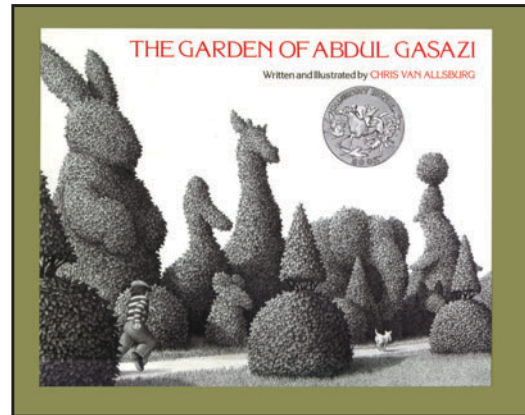
#### Expanding This Lesson:

- Continue this type of discussion during other times when you read aloud to your students.
- Focus on strategies for expressing opinions that are kind. Instead of “You’re wrong!” they can say, “I disagree, and here’s why.” You may want to create a list of nice ways students can speak to one another when they don’t agree in discussions—elicit these ideas from your students.

#### Just for Fun

- Imagine that Alan goes back to talk to Mr. Gasazi about the incident. How will the magician react? Will they become friends? Describe their continuing adventures in writing.
- Imagine that Fritz didn’t come back to Miss Hester’s house—what would Alan have done? Or imagine that Fritz did come back but he remained a duck—how would Alan have explained that to Miss Hester?!

- What if a magician lived down the street from you in your neighborhood? Would your magician be a kind or a grouchy character? What kind of powers might your magician have? Write about what might happen if you were to visit this person.



### *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*

Caldecott Honor Book (1980)  
New York Times Best Illustrated Book of the Year  
Horn Book Award  
ALA Notable Book for Children  
Reading Rainbow Review Book

First book by Chris Van Allsburg

“This is without question one of the best and most original picture books in years.”—*New York Times Book Review*

