

# BEN'S DREAM

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



## Book Summary

**B**en and Margaret ride their bikes home from school as rain clouds gather over their town. Although they were hoping to play baseball that afternoon, they decide instead that they will each go home and study for tomorrow's geography test. Ben, after learning that his mother has gone shopping, settles into a chair with his geography book just as it begins to rain. The rain hitting the windowpanes makes Ben very sleepy.

With a jolt he "awakes" to find that his whole house is floating on a great sea. Ben runs to the porch. The house floats by the Statue of Liberty and Big Ben, both nearly submerged. The house floats under the Eiffel Tower's arch, past the Leaning Tower of Pisa, past the crumbling columns of the Parthenon, and in front of the Sphinx—where he sees another floating house with a small figure looking out of the window. He floats past the Taj Mahal and the Great Wall of China. As he floats past Mount Rushmore, George Washington himself opens his stone mouth to say, "Ben, wake up."

Ben opens his eyes to find that the storm has passed and that Margaret is at the window, ready to play baseball. As the two friends ride their bikes toward the park, Margaret tells Ben that she fell asleep doing geography, too, and had the strangest dream. She tells him how her house floated all around the world past landmarks half submerged in seawater. "Guess who I saw when I floated past the Sphinx," she says to Ben. As he guesses correctly, her jaw drops!

## Special Features

**B**en's *Dream* provides another example of Chris Van Allsburg's extraordinary ability to navigate between waking and sleeping worlds, between reality and fantasy. This time, the landmarks that Ben and Margaret have been studying in geography class come to life for them in an extraordinary way! As Ben drifts off to sleep in an armchair while studying for his geography test, Van Allsburg's textured pen-and-ink drawings seamlessly integrate his sleepy small-town home into very unusual contexts. We imagine that the rain that has lulled Ben to sleep has risen so high that the house is able to float like a great boat across the world.

It will be great fun for children who have some familiarity with the landmarks in the book to try to recognize them as Ben and his house float by. Teachers may want to review some of these places with students before reading the book in order to make the story more meaningful. The pictures speak for themselves as the house floats past the half-submerged forms of the Statue of Liberty and Big Ben. They stand out even more because of Chris Van Allsburg's typically innovative choices about perspective. Readers hover above

Big Ben's clock tower and look *through* the metal frame of the Eiffel Tower. These wordless pages invite children to study the drawings carefully. As Ben floats past the Sphinx, thorough examination will show that we are actually looking out at the Sphinx from the vantage point of Ben's porch. The house in the distance with the figure in the window is *another* floating home. "Whose?" we wonder. A particularly nice touch is the page about Mount Rushmore, in which the eyes of the stone presidents seem to rotate and focus on little Ben. It is George Washington who wakes Ben up.

As the story returns to the real world, the text returns as well. It is not George Washington waking Ben up, but Margaret at the window. A last trick in the book is when Margaret describes having the identical dream—and we realize exactly who the figure in the window of the other house by the Sphinx was.

## Find Fritz

Fritz is the dog in the portrait on the wall of Ben's house on page 9.



## Summary of Teaching Ideas

**T**he most obvious place to use this wonderful book is within the context of a world landmark study—it seems designed specifically for that purpose! An amazing way to make geography more interesting (as Chris Van Allsburg clearly knows) is to imagine you are actually *at* the places described by the text. Things mean more to us when we have some personal experience with them. You can talk with your students about how to use a story or a personal experience to help remember facts. It can also be interesting for children to trace Ben's journey around the world on a real map or globe. Younger children who are still in the emergent phases of reading will enjoy and benefit from retelling the story of Ben's journey using the pictures: much of Chris Van Allsburg's story is told through illustrations. You can encourage your young students to retell Ben's journey using words.

## Guiding Questions for a *Ben's Dream* Read-Aloud

- What is happening on the first page without words? Van Allsburg writes that Ben gets a little sleepy, “in fact, very sleepy. But then . . . How would you finish that sentence?
- As Ben and his house float on the sea, they pass some very interesting places. Can you recognize these places? Can you name them? Do you know where these places are in real life?
- When Ben passes the Sphinx, he sees another house. Who do you think is in the window? Why do you think that?
- At the end, we learn that Ben and Margaret have had the same dream. Do you think it was really a dream? How could two people have the very same dream?

## Stories Can Help Us Remember Facts

*An upper-grade writing/science lesson*

### What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Ben's Dream*
- Writing paper and pens/pencils for each student

### Background Knowledge:

This lesson provides a way to integrate writing into other content areas. You may want to present this lesson in the context of science, geography, or math for example. This lesson will imagine a science lesson in which students have been studying the planets. However, it can easily be adapted to fit the needs of any situation requiring direct memorization in the content area of your choice—the memorization facts about the presidents, multiplication tables, and the water cycle for example.

### Introduction:

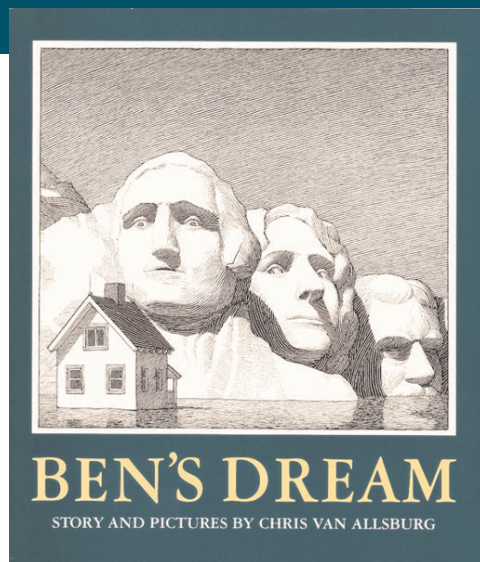
As your students gather around you in a central meeting place, tell them that you will be reading *Ben's Dream* out loud to them. Ask them to notice, as you read, how Chris Van Allsburg demonstrates that stories can help us remember facts about the world by providing us with a more personal experience of them. In the story, Ben has to memorize information about different geographical landmarks. His dream takes him on an actual journey through these places, which will undoubtedly help him remember what they are. Tell your students that they will be writing stories to help them remember all that they have learned about the planets.

### Teaching:

Read *Ben's Dream* to your class. As you go through the pages without text, you may want to elicit from the children where you think Ben is and what landmark he is visiting.

Ask them to imagine how Ben feels as he swirls by these famous spots and views them from the comfort of his own floating front porch. As you finish reading, ask students to discuss how an experience of this sort might make it easier for Ben to remember the facts he must memorize for the next day's history test.

Tell your students that just like Chris Van Allsburg, they will be writing stories that will help them remember facts that they have learned about the planets. Discuss with the class how he probably did some research before writing his story. He didn't just invent



what the Taj Mahal and the Sphinx look like—he had to study them first. Tell your class that they will be using what they have studied about the planets (or whatever content you wish them to write about) to add facts to their stories. Ask them to imagine a journey through the planets. The story could start anywhere but must show the order of the planets from the sun. It may be presented as a dream or as a real journey.

### Writing Time:

As your students write, you will want to confer with as many individuals as possible. Students may have trouble integrating facts into a fictional story, so this may be the focus of many of your conferences.

### Share:

Choose several students to read excerpts of their pieces to the class. You will want to choose students whose pieces provide strong models for how to integrate facts with fiction.

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

- Less experienced writers will usually have had less experience in other content areas as well, so this lesson may provide quite a challenge if you ask students to attempt it individually. The lesson could work beautifully, however, as either a group storytelling experience or a group story that you record on paper. If your class is studying seed germination, for example, you may present the situation to them: “We are going to go on a journey together to the underground world of the sprouting seed. What do you think we will see?” and then have them add on.

### Expanding This Lesson:

- Have students work together to act out the stories they have created. A class studying the ocean may act out a tour of the layers of the ocean, with each student taking on the identity of an ocean creature. A class studying the planets may create a skit in which their classroom blasts off and tours the planets in order all the way to the sun. These skits could be presented to other classes.
- Create a class display in which you make a mural of the class's journey, including facts about the subject you are studying. Hang the students' stories nearby.

## Strong Readers Retell Stories by Looking at the Pictures

*A lower-grade reading lesson*

### What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Ben's Dream*
- A collection of picture books that are familiar to your students. It is helpful if some of them are wordless picture books. You may want to place a bin of these books at each of your students' tables.

### Background Knowledge:

This lesson is designed for learners who are at the beginning stages of learning to read. Readers in the emergent phase of literacy benefit from learning to retell familiar books through the pictures, using the richly literate language of storybooks. *Ben's Dream* is a perfect model for this type of reading work, not only because the bulk of the story is actually told through the pictures and doesn't use words at all, but also because the structure is simple and easy for youngsters to follow. The pictures contain plenty of detail for



children to draw from. The beginning and ending text sets up a tone of richly literate language for students to pick up on and integrate into their own retellings.

**Introduction:**

As your students gather around you in a central meeting place in your classroom, tell them that they will be reading *Ben's Dream* together and working on telling the story through the pictures, as strong readers do. First read through the first few pages of text, setting the children up to understand the story.

**Teaching:**

When you get to the wordless pages, ask the students what they notice. They will probably notice the lack of text on the pages. Tell them that they will be working on telling the story that they see happening in the pictures.

Before you ask for their help, model what you mean for them to do. Beginning on the page where Ben “wakes up” in his dream, begin retelling the story through the pictures. Tell your students that you want to make it sound like a story, not just like a list of what you see: “Instead of saying, ‘I see a boy in a chair,’ make it sound like a story. Listen closely as I try this out . . . ‘Ben woke up with a start to find that his house was tilting back and forth. Drops of salty water sprayed in through the window. Ben ran out of the door to the front porch to take a look . . .’”

Tell your students that they will be trying this out in their own reading work, and that there is a bin of picture books on each of their tables. When they go off to their tables, they will be choosing a book to retell through the pictures, trying to make it sound just like a story.

**Reading Time:**

As your students go off to their tables and begin choosing and then retelling their favorite picture books, confer with them individually or in small groups. You will want to work on having them retell the story using storybook language. Many children tend simply to say out loud what they see in the book: “I see a big bear and a mama bear and a little bear. I see their house,” and so on, as opposed to “Once upon a time, three bears decided to go for a walk in the lovely woods around their home.” Modeling what you mean for children who are retelling in this way can be an extremely effective teaching strategy.

**Share:**

Choose a student to retell a book using rich storybook language. Ask other students what they notice about this child’s retelling. “Did it sound like a real story? What did Kahlil do with his voice and his words to make it sound like a real story?”

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

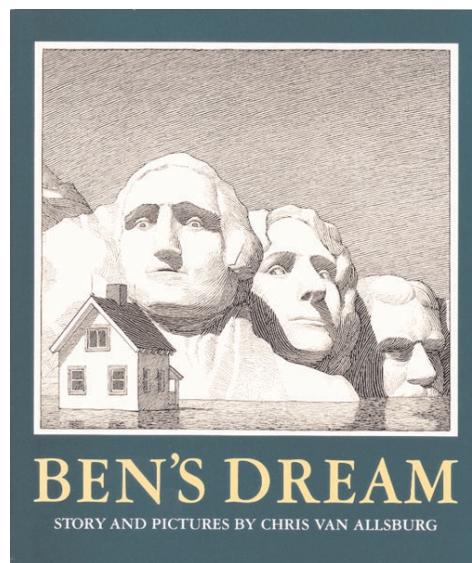
- While retelling stories through the pictures will be a less valuable activity for more experienced readers, they will certainly benefit from the act of creating their own wordless books. Deciding what details to include in the pictures that will give the readers a clear idea of what is happening in the story is a much more sophisticated activity. Older students might create their own wordless books to share with younger readers. The youngsters can then use these books to practice their own retellings!
- More experienced readers might actually write text to go along with the wordless pictures in Chris Van Allsburg’s book.

**Expanding This Lesson:**

- Encourage children to move from re-telling the stories individually to acting them out in small groups. This requires some extra help with management. If you have a couple extra adults in the room to help you work with small groups, you can hold the book and keep students on track as they act out the story. Acting out a story helps young children internalize both the sequence and the language of literature.
- Ask students to tell stories from their own lives using storybook language. You may do this as a class, retelling an experience that it has shared as a whole, or you may have individual children retell stories from their own experience.

**Just for Fun:**

- Imagine that Mount Rushmore comes to life for a day and you get to have a conversation with one (or each) of the presidents. What would you like to ask them?
- If you could float around in your house and visit other lands, where would you go? Why? Describe your adventures.
- Design a tour to important landmarks in your own town. If you were going to give a test on landmarks in your own neighborhood, what places would you choose?



**Ben's Dream (1982)**

- New York Times Best Illustrated Book of the Year
- ALA Notable Book for Children

“[Van Allsburg’s] skill in the lost art and subtle fine points of sculptural line drawing is nothing less than remarkable.”  
— *Art Express*