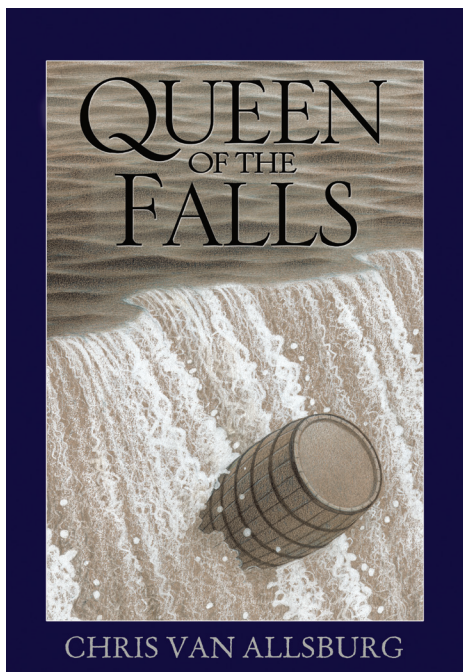


Queen of the Falls

by Chris Van Allsburg



About the Book

At the turn of the nineteenth century, a retired charm school instructor named Annie Edson Taylor, seeking fame and fortune, decided to do something that no one in the world had ever done before—she would go over Niagara Falls in a wooden barrel.

At sixty-two, she was hardly America's typical adventurer, but she accomplished a feat that no other living soul had. While she did get some immediate recognition for her courageous ride, she did not meet with the kind of long-term success she was hoping for. Eventually Annie ended up selling postcards with her picture to tourists in a park near Niagara Falls. Even though Annie didn't strike it rich, she was proud to have been the first person ever to ride Niagara—the Queen of the Falls.

In *Queen of the Falls*, the two-time Caldecott medalist Chris Van Allsburg masterfully crafts text and illustration to chronicle the courageous and eccentric journey of Ms. Taylor as she performs one of the most death-defying feats in American history!

Special Features

Queen of the Falls is in some ways a departure for Chris Van Allsburg. His other picture books are fantasy—while they tend to have very different plot lines, they share a marvelous quality of mystery and surprise. This book is nonfiction. Annie Edson Taylor was a real woman, and she really did everything Van Allsburg's book said she did. In spite of the genre difference, however, *Queen of the Falls* shares the quiriness and suspense of Van Allsburg's other books. It also, of course, has his extraordinary illustrations.

Van Allsburg's pictures tell his stories as much as his words do. In *Queen of the Falls*, one is struck by the emotional expressions his characters wear: Annie in the barrel as it begins to plummet, the calculating look in the eye of her new manager, the delight on Annie's face as the idea occurs to her. Also characteristic of Van Allsburg's work, the illustrations fully evoke Annie's world. America in 1901 was a very different land—Van Allsburg's illustrations are incredibly detailed, historically accurate portraits of a time and place as well as of the characters in the story. The sepia tones of his pencil drawings evoke the warmth of old fashioned photographs taken during that time period.

Van Allsburg's words are equally evocative. As in his other books, he weaves in engaging metaphors and similes—the falls are described as “liquid avalanche,” and the barrel idea hits Annie “like a cork popping from a champagne bottle.”

In addition to the illustrations and language, the way Van Allsburg has chosen to tell the story is an interesting commentary on the time period, as well as a portrait of a brave and fascinating woman. Annie (and so many others at that time) hoped to “strike it rich.” She was unusual in that she accomplished the great feat she set out to accomplish, but not so unusual in that her get-rich-quick scheme didn't work. Another way that Van Allsburg evokes the time period is by blending snippets of dialogue—things we imagine Annie might really have said. Not only do we get a clearer sense of this no-nonsense lady, but we hear a little echo of the way people talked back then.

Annie challenges stereotypes all around. Not only was Annie sixty-two years old at the time of her ride over the falls, but she was a woman. In 1901 it was extremely uncommon for a woman to be able distinguish herself with an act of physical bravery as Annie did. Van Allsburg could have told the story in a different direction and focused simply on the notion of “fulfilling one's dreams,” but he spun it honestly and realistically. Annie was a hard-working woman who wanted to support herself—and wouldn't have minded

Queen of the Falls

by Chris Van Allsburg

the fame and fortune that she hoped would come with her adventure, either. She succeeded in riding over the falls, but never realized the ambitions that drove her to it. Because Van Allsburg tells the truth, Annie's story is all the more moving.

Find Fritz:

Fritz the dog appears in all of Van Allsburg's books. Look closely through the book to find him.

Summary of Teaching Ideas

Because of amount of text, *Queen of the Falls* is best used with upper elementary students, though younger students will enjoy hearing Annie's story as a read-aloud (or as a series of read-alouds) as well. The story provides a wonderful model of creative nonfiction, of storytelling, of biography—perfect for use as a mentor text when studying nonfiction writing. Particularly skillful is Van Allsburg's ability to evoke the personality and mannerisms of a character who was a real person. Students working on blending research with realistic invention such as some of Van Allsburg's dialogue and description will find a wonderful model in *Queen of the Falls*.

It's a great text to use in reading workshop when studying biography as well. Readers can be encouraged to develop their own theories about Annie as a character. Why did she choose that particular act as an attempt to get rich? What other options were open to her as an older woman at that time? Was she satisfied with her choices? Because Van Allsburg's luminous picture books owe so much to the illustrations, they can be a wonderful source for class discussions also. How much do we learn from text and how much do we learn from pictures? *Queen of the Falls* can also fit into a social studies curriculum in which students discuss the changing rights of and options for women.

Guiding Questions for a *Queen of the Falls* Read-Aloud

- Chris Van Allsburg starts *Queen of the Falls* at the most suspenseful moment, as Annie's barrel head over the falls. Before telling us what happens, though, the story flashes back to the time and place Annie dreamed up the idea to try this daring feat. Why do you think he chose to start this way? What does a beginning like this accomplish?
- What factors do you think contributed to Annie's decision to go over the falls? If her charm school business had been successful, do you think it would have occurred to her? Why

or why not?

- Van Allsburg's expressive drawings add many layers to the story. For example, Annie's manager, Frank Russell, has an interesting, appraising expression in Van Allsburg's portrait on page 14. What does his expression tell you about his thoughts?
- What do you think Annie feels as the barrel begins to fall?
- The time period in which Annie lived was very different from today. When Annie went over the falls, it would still be almost twenty years before women got the right to vote. What kinds of challenges did Annie face as a woman in 1901, that she wouldn't necessarily face today?
- Would you do what Annie did? Why or why not?
- At the end, we see that Annie's hope that the barrel ride over the falls would help her strike it rich never materialized—she ends up forgotten, selling postcards by the falls. Do you think she is glad she did it? Why or why not?
- We live in a time when "extreme sports" are all over television and the Internet—people jump out of airplanes, ride bikes off of cliffs, sail alone across the ocean. If someone like Annie were to ride over the falls today, how do you think people would react, especially since this act is now illegal? Why?

A Sample Lesson

Bringing History to Life: Using *Queen of the Falls* as a Guide for Writing Biography

What you'll need:

- A copy of *Queen of the Falls*
- Chart paper and something to write with

Background knowledge:

This lesson works best with students who are not new to nonfiction writing, within the context of a writing workshop study of nonfiction—though it can certainly be presented as a separate project instead. Students may or may not have written biographies before, and it is helpful to immerse writers trying out new

Queen of the Falls

by Chris Van Allsburg

genres in many mentor text examples. You will want to have read through and discussed *Queen of the Falls* at least once. This lesson will launch the writing project, but you'll want to follow up with more (see extensions) depending on the needs of your students and on the length and depth of writing you hope for them to produce. They will need to spend some time researching, either in the library or online, the lives of the characters they choose.

Introduction:

As your students are gathered around you in a central meeting place, tell them that just as Chris Van Allsburg brought Annie Edson Taylor to life in *Queen of the Falls*, they will be choosing a person – from the past or present– to bring to life through writing as well.

Teaching:

Choosing a character to write about is one of the most important decisions a biographer makes. This will be a focus of today's lesson. Ask your students to think about the character of Annie Edson Taylor. Ask, "What makes Annie interesting to read about?" Write students' responses on your chart paper. Feel free to model a few ideas to get the ball rolling, but elicit as much as you can from the students themselves. It is likely that they will notice that she was brave, that she did something no one had ever done before, that she transcended stereotypes of both age and gender etc. After you have a list of several interesting qualities of Annie's character, tell your students that they will be picking characters to write about in biography form as well, and that they can use the things they noticed about what makes Annie interesting when they are choosing their own characters. You might even note that Chris Van Allsburg tends to write other kinds of stories, but that he wrote about Annie because something about her story spoke to him. Tell them that choosing a subject for a biography is really important, and that not only does the character need to be interesting to readers in some of the same ways that Annie is interesting, but that the character needs to be fascinating to the author.

Have students take a quiet moment to come up with some ideas for who they might want to write about. As they are thinking, you might "think out loud" for them about whether or not they want to choose a contemporary character or a character from the past, whether they want to choose someone they know a lot about already, or someone they're just curious about. Have a couple of students share their ideas, and tell why they think that person will

be interesting to write about. Tell students that they will not be starting the biographies today, but they will be writing a short list of possible characters, and then choosing one to write a paragraph about, answering the question, "What makes this character interesting enough to write about?" If they have a hard time answering that question, it's probably not the right choice and they should try again.

Work time:

As your students work independently, check in with them. You may want to bring *Queen of the Falls* and another biography or two with you as you confer with students who are having a hard time getting started. Before you call them back to your class meeting place for a share time, you might ask students to read their paragraphs to a partner.

Share:

Choose one or two students to either read or describe their paragraphs about what makes the character they've chosen interesting.

Adapting this lesson for use with less experienced writers:

- Some writers may need more support with choosing a person to write about—it may just be a matter of asking questions, based on what you know of the child, to help her tap into what she knows. "Don't you play basketball? I bet there are some really interesting ball players that you know about," you might say. Knowing your students well will help you support them in meaningful ways.

What comes next? Expanding on this lesson:

- Have students make a list of questions they have about their character to use as a guide for research.
- Have students (both as homework and in class) research and make notes on the answers to their questions (and other general information) about their characters.
- Have students decide how they will tell the story—chronologically? With a flashback, as Van Allsburg uses in *Queen of the Falls*? At what point in the life of their character will they begin the story? Note that Van Allsburg begins when Annie is already an adult, because that's when the important action happens.

Queen of the Falls by Chris Van Allsburg

- Have students draft their biographies, making sure to incorporate what they've learned from research and using what they know about the qualities of good writing.
- Have students revise and edit their biographies.
- Celebrate!

Just for Fun:

- Try rewriting your biography from the perspective of a different character.
- Illustrate your biography. You could even choose to recreate the photographic look of your character's time period in your art, as Van Allsburg did.
- Research major historical events of 1901. Websites like Wikipedia provide a quick list of major wars, inventions, and other happenings. It can be fascinating to learn what else was happening in the world when Annie rode the falls.