

ZATHURA

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Plot Summary

Danny and Walter Budwing don't get along. When their parents go out for the evening, small arguments escalate until finally Walter, the elder, chases his little brother out of the house and into the park, where he tackles him to the ground. As they wrestle, they catch sight of a board game propped up under a tree. It is called "Jumanji, a Jungle Adventure." Shoving the "baby game" at his brother, Walter heads for home, with Danny trailing behind. As Walter sits down in front of the TV, Danny examines the game. Lodged underneath the Jumanji game board, the little boy finds another game called "Zathura," decorated with exciting-looking flying saucers and planets. Danny starts to play on his own, struggling to read the first game card: "Meteor showers, take evasive action." Immediately, real meteors begin to crash down through the boys' roof! Realizing that they could not possibly still be on Earth, Danny tries hard to convince his disbelieving older brother of the power of the game. Finally, Walter agrees to play. As they play, the game comes to life: Walter sticks to the ceiling for a time in zero gravity. A defective robot seems bent on destroying them. Danny, affected by a gravity surplus, becomes heavy, dense, and round! It is only by working together that they begin to make progress, such as when Walter uses heavy Danny as a bowling ball to flatten the attacking robot. When a black hole swallows Walter, all seems to be lost until the boys find themselves suddenly wrestling again next to the tree in the park. Seeming not to remember the day's events, Danny wants to take the game home. Walter, much wiser for his experience, tosses it in the trash can and suggests a game of catch, much to his little brother's delight.

Special Features

At the end of Chris Van Allsburg's *Jumanji*, Judy and Peter, with great relief at having come through their ordeal, deposit the game in its box back under the tree in the park where they found it — and later see their neighbors Danny and Walter Budwing carrying the box home! After years of wondering what might have happened to the boys who didn't like to read directions, readers get their answer in *Zathura*. Van Allsburg's textured drawings, made with litho pencil on coquille board, show Walter and Danny as two boys full of personality — ornery and argumentative at first. Note: Van Allsburg actually used his own daughters as models for the Budwing boys' interactions! Whereas the world of *Jumanji* invades the home of Peter and Judy, the Budwing boys' home is transported by *Zathura* into outer space, where the strange events the game produces seem delightfully bizarre — a meteor in the living room, a portable black hole. The story is fast-paced and full of action, and readers will enjoy the realistic brotherly banter

between the two boys as much as the description of their adventures. As with many of Van Allsburg's characters the Budwings are changed by the difficult experience they go through together. Instead of antagonizing each other, by the end of the story the boys have learned that working together is the way to solve problems, and that they can enjoy each other's company. We are left with a signature Van Allsburg ending as well—did the boys really go into outer space, or was it just a strange dream?

Find Fritz:

Fritz is in the driver's seat of the little toy sports car perched on Danny and Walter's shelf in the bedroom.



Summary of Teaching Ideas

Zathura provides us with a wonderful opportunity to examine how writers can blend scientific information with a fictional story. While not exactly "science fiction," Van Allsburg's story definitely relies on real information about outer space. Using scientific knowledge to create the events in the story helps Van Allsburg to build on the sense of wonder that his stories are known for. His understanding of meteors augments both his illustrations and his description of how they might hit a house:

The noise grew louder, like a thousand golf balls bouncing off the roof. The room got so dark, Walter turned on the lights. Then—KABOOM—a rock the size of a refrigerator fell through the ceiling and crushed the television.

Van Allsburg also had to know a bit about gravity to describe how Walter floats up to the ceiling when he loses his. He had to know that a gyroscope helps keep things level in order to describe what happens to the house when the boys' gyroscope malfunctions:

Suddenly the house tilted. Everything in the room slid to one side, and Danny got buried under a mountain of furniture.

Zathura provides a perfect example of a story that blends fiction and science. Children will be delighted to write their own stories exploring the relationship between these two disciplines. You can easily tie your writing lesson to your science curriculum. If your students are studying bugs, for example, they might write a story including information they have learned about the way bugs live, eat, interact, and so on.

Guiding Questions for a *Zathura* Read-Aloud

- How would you describe Danny and Walter's relationship at the beginning of the book? If you have a brother or sister, can you relate to any of the things that happen between Walter and Danny?
- What is keeping Danny and Walter from getting along with each other?
- Danny helps Walter by tying him to the sofa when he is about to fly through the hole in the roof. Do you think Walter is used to being helped by his little brother? How do you think this incident starts to change Walter's perception of Danny?
- What happens between the time when Walter is swallowed by the black hole and the time when the boys find themselves wrestling on the grass in the park? How did they get there?
- How has the boys' relationship changed as a result of their experience?

Reaching Beyond Blending Fact and Fiction in Our Stories: *An Upper-grade Writing Lesson*

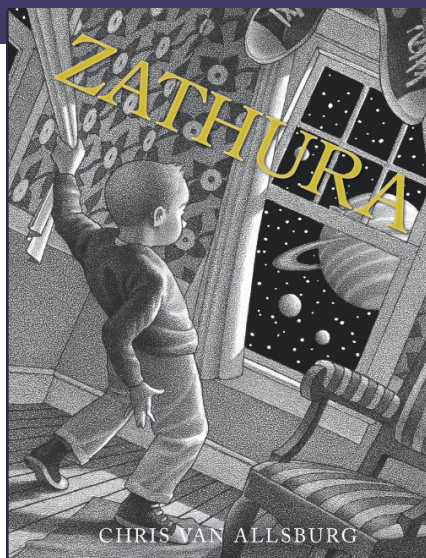
What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Zathura*
- Chart paper and markers
- Writing paper and pencils for the students

Background Knowledge:

It is helpful if your students have already been exposed to the ideas in *Zathura* so they will be more prepared to focus on one specific element of the story. This lesson works well within the context of a unit on writing fiction but can be presented as an independent writing exercise as well.

If you are choosing to focus your lesson around scientific knowledge of outer space, as Van Allsburg does in *Zathura*, you will want to have been working together on gathering information before you present this lesson. You may be engaged in a space study, or you may simply choose to spend some time doing research independent of a space-focused curriculum. One wonderful resource is NASA's For Kids Web site, which is designed specifically for children (<http://www.nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/5-8/features/index.html>). This Web site offers articles written for the 5–8 reading level, NASA facts, related multimedia, Internet resources, student news, and more. You may choose to guide your students' exploration by assigning them specific aspects of space to research (a simple list can really help), or you may just turn them loose to follow their own space interests. When children begin writing their fictional stories with a collection of information, not only will



their imaginations already be stimulated by the act of research and the new things they are learning, but the information will help them to shape their stories and to integrate facts in a believable way.

Introduction:

Tell your students that they will be examining the way Chris Van Allsburg blends scientific facts about outer space with his fictional story in *Zathura*. Ask them to notice, first of all, what particular information about space Van Allsburg chooses to use in *Zathura*. Tell them that you will be writing a list of these facts on the chart paper and then discussing how Van Allsburg blends those facts into the story.

Teaching:

Begin the list in front of your students by thinking out loud. For example, "Hmm—Van Allsburg writes about meteors hitting Walter and Danny's roof. Meteor showers really do occur. Van Allsburg had to know about that to make his illustration and to write that description." You will want also to point out the description to which you are referring:

The noise grew louder, like a thousand golf balls bouncing off the roof. The room got so dark, Walter turned on the lights. Then—KABOOM—a rock the size of a refrigerator fell through the ceiling and crushed the television.

Write "meteor showers" on your chart paper. Elicit more facts from your students. They may say, "There is no gravity in space," or "Many ships that go into space use robots to help them." They may say, "Some planets have gravity that is stronger than Earth's."

When you have made your list, remind your students that Van Allsburg blends these real facts about space into his fictional story about the Budwings' adventure. Tell them that in their writing today, they will have a chance to try out the same thing. You may want to ask them to make a list of scientific facts before they begin to write. You may also want to encourage them to use facts they have been recently studying in class. (For example if they are learning about insects, insect facts might play heavily into their lists.)

Tell students that they must try to work at least three scientific facts into their fictional stories. It is likely that they will not finish this lesson in one class period.

Writing Time:

During writing time, help your students get started generating lists of facts they know, and then see that they begin writing stories incorporating these facts. Confer with them individually about this process.

Share:

Share the work of a student or two who has made headway toward beginning a story that blends fact with fiction.

Adapting this lesson for use with less experienced writers:

- Create a story blending fact and fiction as a class.
- Use the same facts that Van Allsburg uses in his story, but ask students to make up their own space adventure tales.

Expanding this lesson:

- You will need another class period or two to finish this lesson. You might focus the next lesson on how to use the facts they have collected in the story. Chart paper and markers
- Make this lesson a part of each of your class’s science studies. At the end of the year, children will have a collection of wonderful stories, each exploring the relationship between fiction and science.

Getting Along: Resolving Conflict Between Characters in Our Stories

A lower-grade writing lesson

Background Knowledge:

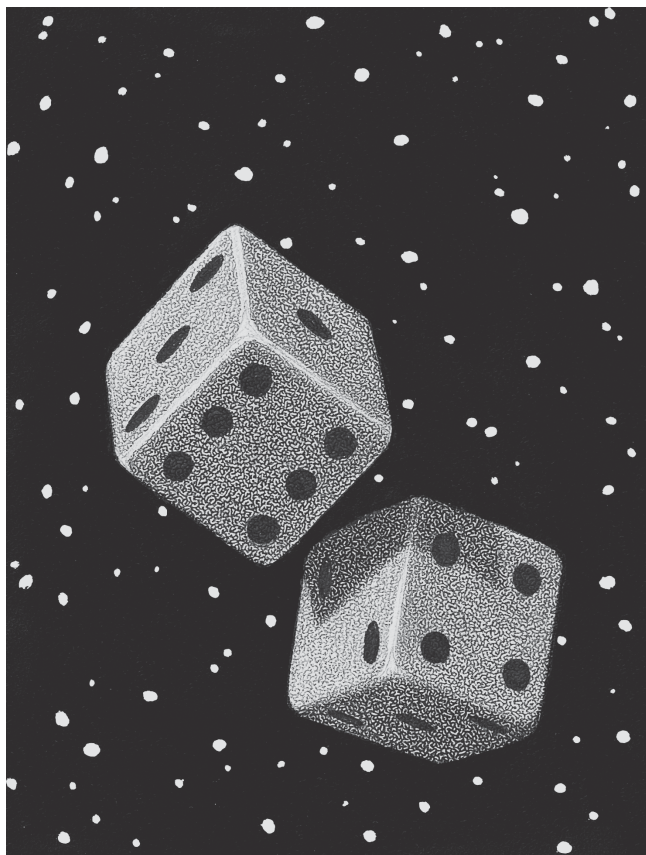
It is helpful if your students have already been exposed to the ideas in *Zathura* so they will be more prepared to focus on one specific element of the story. It is also helpful if you have discussed the book using the guiding questions above so that your students have spent some time thinking about the conflict between Walter and Danny and the way that it is resolved. This lesson works well within the context of a unit on writing personal narrative but can be presented as an independent writing exercise as well—as long as your students have some familiarity with the process of writing personal narrative. Children inevitably will have real-life conflicts from which to draw as they write. You may choose, however, to present the lesson within the context of writing fiction.

Introduction:

Tell your students that most stories involve some sort of conflict, or disagreement between the characters. In *Zathura*, Walter and Danny are two brothers who don’t get along with each other very well. Just as Chris Van Allsburg creates a conflict, or disagreement, and then helps Walter and Danny resolve that conflict, your students will be making stories that deal with their own real-life disagreements with siblings or friends.

Teaching:

Read for your students the first page of *Zathura*, in which Walter and Danny are fighting about the broken walkie-talkie. Tell them that Chris Van Allsburg describes the situation so clearly (Walter “let go of Danny’s nose and grabbed his ears”) that we get a vivid picture in our minds of these rambunctious and argumentative youngsters. It almost seems impossible that these two will ever get along. By sharing the exciting and frightening experience of *Zathura*, however, the boys learn that they must depend on each other to make it back home. Ask the students to turn and talk to someone sitting near them about how Chris Van Allsburg has the boys resolve their conflict: How must they help each other in the story? When you call them back together, they may say things like “Walter uses Danny to break the robot,” or “Danny helps Walter by tying him to the sofa when he loses his gravity.” Tell



them that they will be thinking of and then writing about a situation in which they were disagreeing with a friend or family member but learned to work together in the end. You may want to tell about a situation like this from your own life. For example, “When I was a little girl, my big sister and I used to argue over who had the most space in our room. We were always fighting about it — once we even put a big tape line down the middle! We had to learn to work together, though, when it was time to clean up.” Using a real experience from your own life will not only engage your students’ attention, but help them to think of an experience in their lives. You may want to suggest some situations you’ve seen in the classroom, too: “Sometimes kids argue in the block area, but you have to learn how to work together to make your building strong.” Have your students close their eyes for a moment to think of a situation they’d like to write about during writing time. When they look up, send them to their tables to begin.

Writing Time:

As your students write, move around among them, conferring with small groups or individual students. You may want to teach about the idea of using dialogue to show conflict, the way Chris Van Allsburg does in *Zathura*. You may also help students plan how their stories will go before they begin to write.

Share:

You may choose to have students share their stories in partnerships, or you may choose one or two students to share something they’ve tried that may help other students or may become a topic for a subsequent lesson — planning, for example, or using dialogue.

Adapting this lesson for use with less experienced writers:

- Write a group story about a conflict in the classroom.
- Have students draw two pictures — the first showing an argument they’ve had with a sibling or friend, the next showing how the conflict was resolved. This could become more of a social lesson as well, focused around “getting along.”

Expanding this lesson:

- The students’ stories will not be finished the first day — you may want to spend several days working on various aspects of writing about character conflict and resolution. Do a lesson on using dialogue, or on having the characters in your story express their feelings.
- Collect the stories into a “friendship book” so that your students have plenty of examples for how conflicts can be resolved.