

## ***Because of That Crow* Teachers' Guide**

*Because of That Crow* is a middle-grade novel by Bev Brenna (2020, Red Deer Press)

Author of Teachers' Guide: Bev Brenna

### **Story Summary**

*Harris is still dealing with the death of his parents, three years after the accident. His Grampa's cross all the time. His older sister Tessa thinks only about a boy at school. And Pinky—well, Pinky does what three-year-olds do. Now Harris must finish a poster in time for the upcoming science fair or else suffer the consequences. When a mysterious crow flies into his life, Harris starts thinking about memory and how it works. But will his discoveries help him rise above the past? Magic realism for ages 8 – 12.*

### **Author Statement: Bev Brenna**

I think that stories have opportunities to reach children through their innermost feelings, supporting them through challenges and offering them examples of how to cope. I began writing *Because of That Crow* from an anecdote shared by my sister-in-law, a teacher who experienced a situation where a crow tried to come to school. Before long, however, I was tapping into quite a different theme— my own journey with grief and loss—and connecting ideas about memory and hope to an imaginary larger-than-life crow who began to occupy my dreamscapes and flap about my everyday activities.

While I was finishing the final draft of this novel, I worked a great deal sitting with my laptop in our glassed-in front porch. Right outside, in branches of nearby elms and mountain ash trees, a very large and frowsy crow began to perch. As the days went by, this crow came closer and closer to my writing activities, eventually bobbing up and down on the closest possible branch and staring through the window with one beady eye. Every now and then it would tilt its head to

one side and warble—not caw-caw, but a melodic bubbling trill. I think it must have been saying “Are you writing about me?” and “Will I finally be the good guy?” In the end, I hope this crow feels vindicated by my novel, as for many years I know that crows have not been very popular in my neighborhood (they are such early risers and very vocal when people are still trying to sleep!).

### **Genre**

While much of this book is realistic, there are places where readers might say, “Okay, that would never happen in real life!” Because of this blend of the real and the unreal, the genre “magic realism” is how the author describes this story. It’s possible that the crow rises up in Harris’s imagination, but perhaps it really is a flight of memory come to land. As readers, we can decide for ourselves what we want to believe, but there is a delicate magic a look at this book—see what you think.

### **Truth and Reconciliation Connections**

In Saskatchewan schools, children of many cultures work and play together. Rather than treating the classroom in this story with a more general “multicultural” approach, specific connections have been made through Indigenous games. This classroom, and all classrooms in Canada, should demonstrate understanding, empathy, and mutual respect, along with a particular inclusion of Indigenous ideas as reflective of the First Peoples of Canada. As you read about the game played by the children in this story, think about why the teacher is including it. What does Reconciliation mean to you? What other sections of the story might be opened to include more Indigenous content?

**Activity Web** (format adapted from Charlotte Huck): these activities are designed for selection as response activities after reading the novel. A directed reading/thinking or listening/thinking format is recommended as comprehension support for classrooms planning to read the novel, whereby teachers and students make logical predictions, read chapters, summarize, and begin the predicting cycle anew until the book is completed. Selections chosen for rehearsed re-reading/choral reading are also recommended to enhance fluency after the teacher models particular passages. After the book is finished, students can be invited to select a minimum number of activities in order to engage and deepen their understanding of the story, and share this understanding with others. In addition, students may be invited to add new ideas to the following web, for themselves or other students to experience.

<b>Art Activities</b>	<b>Considering Alternatives</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Draw what Harris’s poster version of his family might have looked like from the end of the story; then draw a poster version of your own family to compare.</li> <li>➤ Use clay or plasticine to design the crow and place it in a shoebox diorama you create of any setting found in the story.</li> <li>➤ Create an informational poster for a topic you research related to Saskatchewan science content.</li> <li>➤ Locate images of Monet’s impressionist paintings online and explore re-creating this style with watercolor or pastel.</li> <li>➤ Design a series of floral dresses for a paper doll version of Mrs. Featherbuster.</li> <li>➤ Design a shortened picture book or</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ What if Harris had to write a science report after all and present it to his class?</li> <li>➤ How might the story be different if Gramma hadn’t been killed in the fire?</li> <li>➤ What if Violet hadn’t died?</li> <li>➤ What might have happened differently if the intern hadn’t been the crow’s original owner?</li> <li>➤ Can you think of ideas for new scenes for the story if Harris and Mike Morin hadn’t come to “an understanding”?</li> <li>➤ Think about the author’s purpose for having the crow in this story; what might be added instead, to achieve this purpose, if the crow were not included?</li> <li>➤ What is the purpose of the scene where Pinky drinks Chomper? Could the author have met this outcome</li> </ul>

<p>graphic novel version of this story.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Create a treasure box containing items Tessa might have kept in there.</li> <li>➤ Make a mobile of your five favourite characters in the story and put three describing words on the back of each.</li> </ul>	<p>another way?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Sometimes Harris's family argues. List examples of the topics they argue about. What common things could they have argued about instead?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Creative Writing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Create the letters of reprimand that now exist in Harris's school file.</li> <li>➤ Write a short version or scene from this story in a different format (picture book; graphic novel; verse novel) or from a different point of view (first person; third person present) or from a minor character's perspective (Pete; Vinny; Tessa; etc.).</li> <li>➤ Write a series of texts that might have occurred between Tessa and Jason Beam.</li> <li>➤ Develop the backstory of Vinny the Crow.</li> <li>➤ Write the want ads Vinny's first family might have created once he got lost.</li> <li>➤ Write a poem or monologue from the perspective of one of the stuffed birds in the library.</li> <li>➤ Do two "open mind" portraits to compare your favorite characters in the story.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Drama</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Characters A &amp; B improvise a scene where A is Grampa and B is Tessa arguing about the school dance.</li> <li>➤ Characters A &amp; B where A is a teacher concerned about a student's late work and B is the student.</li> <li>➤ Develop the scene where Grampa tells Harris the accident that killed his parents wasn't Harris's fault.</li> <li>➤ Work in a small group to create a tableau of the Science Fair scene. Use Voice in the Head to highlight details from the book.</li> <li>➤ Hotseat Vinny.</li> <li>➤ Develop a monologue as if you were Pete, telling about his friendship with Vinny.</li> <li>➤ Improvise a conversation between Vinny and Pete where Vinny is helping Pete learn to stand up for himself.</li> </ul>

<b>Interdisciplinary Research Ideas</b>	<b>Literary Awareness</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Find out how to play the Cree game <i>Pitisowewepahikan</i> and write a short explanation of it before you teach it to the class (Physical Education).</li> <li>➤ Look up topics from the Grade Four Science or Health Curriculum and do a short research essay on one of them (Science/Health).</li> <li>➤ Write ten questions about crows and then work with a partner to find answers to them (Science).</li> <li>➤ Compose a pamphlet to help people stop smoking (Health).</li> <li>➤ Research the origin of the songs mentioned in the book (Music).</li> <li>➤ How much would a big gold nugget sell for these days compared to twenty years ago? (Science and Social Studies).</li> <li>➤ Find out more about the Gold Rush and panning for gold (Social Studies).</li> <li>➤ Explore gold nuggets around the world using this website: <a href="https://www.bullionstar.com/blogs/bullionstar/worlds-largest-gold-nuggets/">https://www.bullionstar.com/blogs/bullionstar/worlds-largest-gold-nuggets/</a></li> <li>➤ Compare past to present using this current information about panning for gold (Social Studies): <a href="http://www.emr.gov.yk.ca/mining/pdf/recreational_gold_panning_brochure_rvsd.pdf">http://www.emr.gov.yk.ca/mining/pdf/recreational_gold_panning_brochure_rvsd.pdf</a></li> <li>➤ Explore how daily schedules assist people with autism and consider whether Xavier might be on the spectrum (Health; Science).</li> <li>➤ Grampa ate chocolate chips to keep from smoking. Research the addictive properties of cigarettes and make a poster about alternative methods people use to break the habit (Health).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ This story is written from third-person, past tense. Try re-writing a short section in first-person present or in third-person present and compare. Why do you think the author chose the tense she did?</li> <li>➤ Consider the length of the book—do you think it's a good length for telling this story? Why/why not?</li> <li>➤ Consider the length of chapters in this book: do the chapter lengths work for this story? Why/not?</li> <li>➤ Consider the idea of a literary motif and talk about how the crow connected to the themes of the story.</li> <li>➤ What authors and poetry or prose would you bring into this grade four classroom if you were the teacher?</li> <li>➤ What is magic realism? Try writing something in this genre.</li> <li>➤ What is the definition of “narrative non-fiction”? Locate a couple of examples of this genre to share with the class.</li> <li>➤ Why might the author have chosen not to name each chapter? Select three chapters and list names you think would suit them.</li> <li>➤ This story was first created as a picture book called <i>The Counting Crow</i> (never published). Contact the author for a copy of this manuscript and then decide which version of the story you like better and why.</li> </ul>

<b>Personal Response</b>	<b>Related Literature</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Have you ever experienced losing a loved one? What stages of grief did you feel? What helped you through this process?</li> <li>➤ If you could choose an animal to help you in some way, as the crow may have helped Harris and other characters in the story, what animal would you choose? Why?</li> <li>➤ Does the classroom in the story remind you in any way of your classroom?</li> <li>➤ Have you ever blamed yourself for an accident that happened? How did you get past it?</li> <li>➤ Many of the characters in this story have experienced loss. Write a journal entry about a loss that you or someone you know has experienced.</li> <li>➤ What would you do if you were given Mrs. F.'s gold nugget?</li> <li>➤ Have you ever helped a friend or family member feel better when they were sad? How did you do it?</li> <li>➤ Tessa kept things inside her memory box to help her remember good things. What good things would you like to remember? Create your own memory box.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Compare this story to other middle-grade books that deal with grief and loss, such as: <i>The Tiger Rising</i> (Kate DiCamillo); <i>Because of Winn Dixie</i> (Kate DiCamillo); <i>Mama's Going to Buy You a Mockingbird</i> (Jean Little); <i>Gemini Summer</i> (Iain Lawrence); <i>Charlotte's Web</i> (E. B. White).</li> <li>➤ Other stories about crows can be found in the following titles: the picture book <i>Charles</i> by S. E. Hume (illustrated by Jessica Bromley Bartram); <i>Rainbow Crow</i> by David Bouchard (illustrated by David Jean); <i>The Scarecrow</i> by Beth Ferry (illustrated by the Fan Brothers) and <i>Lila and the Crow</i> by Gabrielle Grimard; <i>Hello Crow</i> by Candace Savage (illustrated by Chelsea O'Byrne)</li> <li>➤ A title emphasizing our reliance on the natural world around us is Dale Auger's <i>Mwâkwa Talks to the Loon: A Cree Story for Children</i>.</li> <li>➤ <i>When the Trees Crackle with Cold: A Cree Calendar: PISIMWASINAHIKAN</i> by Bernice Johnson-Laxdal &amp; Miriam Körner, presents a traditional Cree moon calendar, including activities that would traditionally occur in these months.</li> <li>➤ A non-fiction book for young people that talks about grief and loss is: <i>I Found a Dead Bird—the Kids' Guide to the Cycle of Life &amp; Death</i> (Jan Thornhill)</li> <li>➤ Non-fiction books for young people on anxiety include Kari Dunn</li> </ul>

	<p>Buron's <i>When My Worries Get Too Big</i> (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) and Joey Mandel's <i>Anxiety: Deal with It Before It Ties You Up in Knots</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Farley Mowatt's novel <i>Owls in the Family</i> is mentioned in the novel.</li> <li>➤ Compare the role of Vinny the crow in this story to Ulysses the squirrel in Kate DiCamillo's <i>Flora and Ulysses</i>.</li> <li>➤ A resource book for adult readers who might find some interesting materials to share about crows is Candace Savage's <i>Crows: Encounters with the Wise Guys of the Avian World</i>.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Values Clarification</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Were the children right to tease Marsha Abbott about her teeth? Why do you think they did it?</li> <li>➤ Who were Harris's friends in this story? What friendship qualities did they demonstrate?</li> <li>➤ Was Harris right in telling Grampa that Gramma's death wasn't his fault? Discuss your views.</li> <li>➤ Was Grampa right to insist that Tessa be picked up at eleven pm? Why do you think this?</li> <li>➤ Evaluate how the teacher responded when Harris punched Mike Morin. What would you have done if you were the teacher? Why?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Other Ideas</b></p> <p><u>Music</u>: Find a song that you think represents each of the following characters: Harris; Vinny; Pete; Pinky; Tessa; Grampa</p> <p><u>Critical Literacy</u>: Are there any characters with cultural or ability differences in the novel? Why do you think the author included them?</p> <p><u>Comprehension</u>: Model and practice the following reading strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Making connections to self, text, and world</li> <li>➤ Rehearsed rereading for oral fluency and sight word development</li> <li>➤ Summarizing</li> <li>➤ Making predictions</li> <li>➤ What to do when encountering a hard word (guessing from the picture and checking to the actual letters using phonics; looking for a little known word within an unfamiliar word; looking for a familiar word part/word family;</li> </ul>

	<p>thinking about what would make sense and then checking to the actual letters using phonics, etc.)</p> <p><u>Further Questions?</u></p> <p>Compose a group letter to the author.</p>
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