

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Best Christmas Pageant Ever

by  
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## Book Information

Barbara Robinson, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever  
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The Herdman children, given to horrible pranks, take over the Sunday school Christmas pageant but eventually learn the true meaning of Christmas.

**Topics:** Behavior, Lying; Behavior, Manners; Behavior, Obedience; Behavior, Stealing; Family Life, Brothers; Family Life, Sisters; Humor/Funny, Funny; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, See All Sides; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5

## Main Characters

Alice Wendleken the narrator's friend who has always played Mary in the Christmas pageant until Imogene threatens her and takes over the part

Charlie the narrator's brother, who is responsible for the Herdmans coming to Sunday school

Father the narrator's father

Imogene Herdman one of the Herdman children who bullies her way into getting the role of Mary in the Christmas pageant

Mother the narrator's mother, who is reluctantly in charge of the Christmas pageant

Mrs. Armstrong the woman who has always been in charge of the Christmas pageant until this year when she breaks her leg

Ralph, Leroy, Claude, Ollie, and Gladys Herdman the remainder of the Herdman children who all have a role in the Christmas pageant

the narrator the girl who tells the story; she is in the same grade as Imogene Herdman

## Vocabulary

**bobcat** a North-American wildcat

**penitentiary** a prison for those convicted of major crimes

**refugees** people who flee, usually to another country, for safety

**vengeance** with great violence or fury

## Synopsis

The Herdman children - Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie, and Gladys - have the reputation of being the "worst kids in the history of the world." They live with their mother, who works two jobs and is not home very much to watch over them. Their father climbed on a train and left town when Gladys was two years old. The story's narrator, a classmate of Imogene, begins with an account of how the Herdmans burned down a toolhouse with a stolen chemistry set. She also informs the reader the Herdmans pass from grade to grade because teachers do not want to keep them in their classrooms any longer than necessary. They all have a history of causing havoc, as Claude did when he brought the Herdmans' wild cat for Show-and-Tell. Imogene, the older sister, likes to find out secrets. She sneaks around to find out everyone's weight when her classmates are weighed at school. She uses this information to blackmail the overweight kids into giving her things she wants. Everyone figures the Herdmans are leading lives that will get them into the state penitentiary.

However, because the narrator's younger brother, Charlie, lies by telling Leroy Herdman there are all kinds of snacks and foods at Sunday school, the Herdmans show up one Sunday. The Sunday school superintendent announces the upcoming Christmas pageant that day. Unfortunately, Mrs. Armstrong, the woman who is always in charge of the Christmas pageant, breaks her leg and the narrator's mother is reluctantly left in charge of the pageant. When it comes time to choose which children are going to have the major roles in the play, it becomes evident the Herdmans have bullied the other children into letting them have the parts. So, not only is the narrator's mother in charge of the play, she now has the meanest kids in town starring

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in the leading roles. This sets the community in an uproar, but the narrator's mother vows to make this the best Christmas pageant anyone has seen.

During the first pageant rehearsal, the narrator's mother has to retell the Christmas story because the Herdmans do not know it. They are full of questions and are shocked at the idea that Mary and Joseph had no place to stay for the night, so they want to change the story by beating up King Herod. They even go to the library to find out more about him. All the while the rehearsals are going on, Alice Wendleken, who was bullied from her usual starring role as Mary, is taking notes about what the Herdmans are doing in hopes of getting the Herdmans removed from the pageant. She is waiting for one big sinful thing to happen so she can report it to her mother. The "sinful thing" happens on the last rehearsal night. During a short break, Imogene smokes a cigar in the bathroom causing Mrs. McCarthy to think there is fire. She calls the fire department and everyone exits the church. The whole church is in an uproar over the incident, but the narrator's mother refuses to cancel the pageant.

The night of the pageant, the narrator watches the Herdmans carefully and realizes Imogene and Ralph probably look much like the real Mary and Joseph did. She is further impressed when the Wise Men (Leroy, Claude, and Ollie) march up the aisle carrying a ham as a gift for the baby Jesus. The church charitable works committee had given the Herdmans a food basket with the ham. They, in turn, were giving it to someone else. The Herdmans had never given anything to anyone before. But, that is not the moment the audience is waiting for. They are sure the Herdmans will do something absolutely unexpected, and it happens when Imogene starts to cry when she is deeply touched by the significance of the reenactment. For reasons no one seems to know, everybody realizes it has been the best Christmas pageant they have ever seen.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

Imogene cries during the Christmas pageant. What are some likely reasons for this?

*Imogene is overwhelmed by the beauty of the Christmas story, which is a story with which she was previously unfamiliar. She might also be happy to have such a wonderful role in the pageant. Also, she might like having people see her doing something nice, rather than something bad.*

### Literary Analysis

The narrator's mother is torn between her reluctance to be in charge of the Christmas pageant and her desire to make it the best pageant anyone has ever seen. Why does she have this conflict?

*Being in charge of the Christmas pageant is a lot more work than overseeing the pot-luck supper and the bazaar. Mrs. Armstrong, the previous pageant planner, hints that if she were still in charge, the Herdmans would not be in the pageant. The narrator's mother feels Mrs. Armstrong is also hinting that the pageant can not possibly turn out very well without her in charge. It would seem the narrator's mother's pride steps up, and she feels challenged to provide a great pageant.*

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## Inferential Comprehension

As Imogene and Ralph enter the church during the pageant, the narrator watches them and realizes they probably look much like the real Holy Family did. What similarities does she see? What other similarities can you see that the narrator does not?

*The narrator says Imogene and Ralph looked like refugees, "sent to wait in some strange ugly place...." She also mentions they are not very tidy and suggests the Holy Family probably was not very tidy either, as they were "stuck away in a barn by people who didn't much care what happened to them." Other similarities might be that Imogene and Ralph are somewhat nervous as they enter the church, just as Mary and Joseph were nervous trying to find shelter, both couples were quiet and subdued by what was going on around them, and both couples were overwhelmed with the responsibility that lay before them that night.*

## Constructing Meaning

What was your favorite part of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*? Why?

*Students' responses will vary, but all should explain the reasons for their choices.*

## Teachable Skills

**Making Predictions** The story ends with the production of the Christmas pageant. No one seems to know why, but they agree it was the best pageant ever. Have students predict what a review will say about the pageant in the newspaper the next day. Brainstorm some ideas and then have them write a brief review based on what they think the community thought of the pageant.

**Recognizing Details** When it is first discovered that the Herdmans will be in the pageant, someone suggests they hand out the pageant's programs instead. The narrator's mother mentions there are no programs for the pageant. Have students create a Christmas program for the pageant. Brainstorm what details they will need to include in the program and how they

should be arranged. Students should proofread their programs to be sure details are correct and all words are spelled accurately.

**Understanding Sequence** The Herdmans create chaos in several places in the story. Have students choose one of the scenes in which there is an incident caused by the Herdmans. After choosing the scene, they should reread the incident and create a diorama of the scene and setting to match what it looked like. For example, the toolshed fire, Claude's first grade classroom during Show-and-Tell with the cat, or the church during Imogene's portrayal of Mary in the Christmas pageant would make good dioramic scenes. Then have students arrange the dioramas of the scenes in the order in which they occurred.

**Understanding the Main Idea** *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* has been made into a movie. Have students create movie posters advertising the book or movie. Discuss what elements are found on movie posters and what main idea needs to come across in the advertisement.