

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Twenty-One Balloons by William Pène du Bois

Book Information

William Pène du Bois, The Twenty-One Balloons

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Interest Level: MG

This tale relates the incredible adventures of Professor William Waterman Sherman, who in 1883 journeys in a balloon across the Pacific Ocean, survives the volcanic eruption of Krakatoa, and is eventually rescued in the Atlantic Ocean.

Award: ABA Children's Book Council; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Newbery Medal

Topics: Adventure, Travel; Transportation/Vehicles, Balloons

Main Characters

Joseph Tomes the President of Tomes Aeronautical Studios; he proposes his company design a balloon conveyance so that it can be part of Professor Sherman's welcoming parade

Mr. F. the man who discovered Professor Sherman on the beach of Krakatoa and informed him about the island and its residents

Mr. M. the man who discovered the diamond mines on Krakatoa and recruited families to live there

Professor William Waterman Sherman the main character of the story; a retired schoolteacher who set out to travel around the world in a hot-air balloon but accidentally landed on the island of Krakatoa

the Mayor of San Francisco a man who loves to be seen with celebrities; he fawns over Professor Sherman once the Professor returns to San Francisco

Vocabulary

balustrade a rail supported by posts that is placed along the outside of a porch or platform

flotsam floating debris and wreckage

fraternity a group of people associated with a common interest or purpose

intrepid courageous; brave

unprecedented having no previous example from which to draw

Synopsis

Professor William Waterman Sherman is rescued from the Atlantic Ocean clinging to the wreckage of a platform attached to the debris of twenty hot-air balloons. Newspaper reports indicate he had left San Francisco only three weeks before to start a yearlong trip across the Pacific Ocean by hot-air balloon. The trip was his effort to escape human contact after his retirement from forty years of teaching mathematics at a boys' school. Curiosity grows about Professor Sherman and his adventure while he is recuperating in New York. However, he refuses to tell his story to anyone until he returns to San Francisco. Because of a code of ethics among explorers, he feels he must first address the Western American Explorers' Club. Even the President of the United States gets involved in trying to find out what happened. He invites Professor Sherman to the White House in exchange for hearing the story. The Professor declines, and, appreciating his loyalty, the President offers Sherman and Sherman's doctor the presidential train for a quicker trip back to San Francisco.

Meanwhile, the Mayor of San Francisco is busy having the city decorated for a hero's welcome. Balloons are commissioned to be hung everywhere, and hilarity results as people try to outdo one another in carrying out the balloon theme. When Professor Sherman finally arrives, he is still weak from his ordeal and his train trip, but he is whisked to the auditorium of the Explorers' Club, where he relates his story while lying in a bed on the stage.

Professor Sherman claims that after taking off from San Francisco, all went well with the specially designed balloon and basket house until a seagull punctured his balloon. He made an emergency landing on a small island after throwing everything overboard, including his clothes. After crash landing

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on a deserted beach, he was awakened sometime later by a well-dressed man, Mr. F., who offered him new clothes and led him inland. On the way, they stopped near a mountain and Mr. F. explained the rumblings and shaking of the island. Inside the volcanic mountain, the Professor was dumbfounded to see a room loaded with diamonds of various sizes ranging from pebbles to boulders. Upon exiting, Mr. F. said the Professor would never be able to leave the island since he now knew its secret. The residents had convinced the outside world that the island was uninhabitable to ensure the safety of the diamonds.

The next day, Mr. F. told the Professor how Krakatoa became inhabited by twenty hand-picked, intelligent, talented, and creative families. Mr. F. went on to tell him about their initial greed for diamonds, as well as the "restaurant government" they designed in their constitution to solve the problem of distributing the diamonds. The families were named after the letters in the alphabet, and their houses designed using the architecture of a country that begins with that same letter. Each family had to cook one day a month, making dishes from the country that their letter and house represented. Because they socialized and came to agreements while all eating together, they referred to their decision making process as a "restaurant government." Mr. F. also showed Professor Sherman some of the inventions in the homes on the island.

The Professor interrupts his story by asking for a short intermission. His listening audience returns to the hall waiting in silent anticipation for the end of his tale. After being doted upon by the Mayor and a surgeon, Professor Sherman begins again...

Mr. F. next took the Professor to a clearing in the jungle and showed him a balloon merry-go-round the children of the island invented for amusement. It combined the sports of ballooning and sailing, and the Professor was able to have a ride in it and observe the skill of the children as they flew the conveyance and then sailed home. The next day, the Professor inquired as to why the Krakatoans

stayed on an island that was prone to eruption and, thus, extremely dangerous. Mr. F. told the Professor about another invention, the flying platform they had built to carry all the families away from the island in ten minutes if the island's volcano were to erupt. He showed the platform to the Professor and encouraged him to have a parachute made just in case a new eruption became imminent.

The next day the Professor shared some news about San Francisco with Mr. F., who encouraged him to give a talk to all the islanders, since San Francisco was everyone's hometown. As the Professor spoke to the assembled families, the mountain began to erupt. Everyone ran to the platform, which lifted off in time to avoid the upheaval. They were over Java when their former island home blew up. Since the Professor did not have a parachute, Mr. M., the man in charge, realized that the platform would have to be landed for the Professor to survive. He ordered that everyone but one family jump when they first sighted land, so nineteen of the families landed in India. The F. family stayed with the Professor until they parachuted out over Belgium. The Professor then crashed the platform into the Atlantic Ocean near the coast of England. He was rescued by a passing ship after being in the water only twenty minutes.

This solves the mystery of the Professor's travels. When asked by the audience what he plans to do next, he responds that he will sell his diamond cufflinks and build himself another balloon with the hope of spending a year in the air away from people.

Open-Ended Questions

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

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Initial Understanding

What helps the Krakatoans from feeling trapped on the island?

There are a number of reasons the islanders are able to handle the isolated island life. They have their families with them, a creative outlet in their homes and meals they prepare, and they take frequent trips aboard the freighter to other countries where they pick up supplies. Since they were chosen for their creativity and talents, they have much to share and learn from one another.

Literary Analysis

What techniques does the author use to generate suspense in the story?

By starting the story when the Professor is picked up in the ocean, the reader becomes curious as to the circumstances that put him there. When the Professor fails to reveal his adventure despite intense persuasion, the reader's interest becomes even greater. The Professor talks slowly and with great detail about his journey, so the suspense is drawn out. Just when some new inventions are about to be revealed, the Professor pauses for an intermission, so again, the suspense is drawn out. The resolution as to how the Professor found himself in the Atlantic Ocean does not come until the end, so the reader, like the Professor's audience, is filled with curiosity until the end of the story.

Inferential Comprehension

Most of the families aboard the escape platform land in India. What may have happened to them? Why has no one heard from them?

If the reliability of other Krakatoan inventions is any indication, the families most likely land safely in India. During the time of the story, British rule had been established in India, but communication channels were slow. The people of India spoke many different languages and dialects, and it may have been difficult for the families to communicate with them. One can speculate that the families found their way to a village and hopefully were welcomed. The natives may even have been willing to bring the families to a larger city in order for them to find help. Professor Sherman beat them to the press, but their stories may emerge later, especially after they establish themselves in some area with a large amount of wealth attained by selling the diamonds from their parachutes. It is also possible the nineteen families will agree to split up or keep their pasts a secret so as to not flood the diamond market.

Constructing Meaning

If you had landed on Krakatoa and were asked to select a name beginning with any letter of the alphabet, what name would you pick? After what country would you model your house and restaurant? What would your house look like and what would you serve?

Students should name a country not mentioned in the story that begins with their selected letter and describe a house based on the architecture of that country. They should also describe some foods or dishes that are native to that country and suggest a meal they would serve their guests on the day they are hosting.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Professor Sherman leaves on his balloon journey from San Francisco and lands on the island of Krakatoa. After the explosion he travels from Krakatoa and ends up

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in the Atlantic Ocean near England. He is picked up by a ship and brought to New York. He then travels from New York to San Francisco aboard a train. For a lesson in geography, ask the students to obtain a world map and trace Professor Sherman's travels on the map, indicating the mode of travel on each leg of the journey. Then, using the map scale, they can calculate the distance Professor Sherman traveled. Since he completed the journey in forty days, the average miles traveled per day and per hour can be calculated.

order to keep the price of this gem high. Students can be asked to write a paper about their findings.

Describing Actions or Events When the families are on the escape balloon platform, food is rationed. Rationing often takes place in areas where there is some type of crisis, such as a war, a famine, or a natural disaster. Sometimes it occurs on a smaller scale such as when a store runs a sale for which it limits the quantity a customer can buy. Have the students find three examples of rationing that have occurred or are now occurring and indicate the reason rationing was or is necessary in each situation.

Recognizing Details A number of balloon inventions are described and illustrated in the story with attention being given to detail, especially in regard to connections and lifting power. Encourage the students to design their own balloon conveyance, paying attention to the details of balloon size necessary to generate enough lift, and overall design of the conveyance. They can then make an illustration of the conveyance and indicate balloon size, heights, weights, etc. The students can explain their inventions to the class, after which the illustrations can be displayed.

Extending Meaning It is mentioned a few times in the story that a diamond market exists and that if the Krakatoans were to bring their diamonds in quantity to the dealers, they would become worthless. The students may be interested in learning about the diamond industry, from the mining of these precious stones to the cutting and selling of them in jewelry stores. They can learn how the diamonds are graded, weighed, and priced, as well as the ways the market is run in