

Sample Pages from

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever

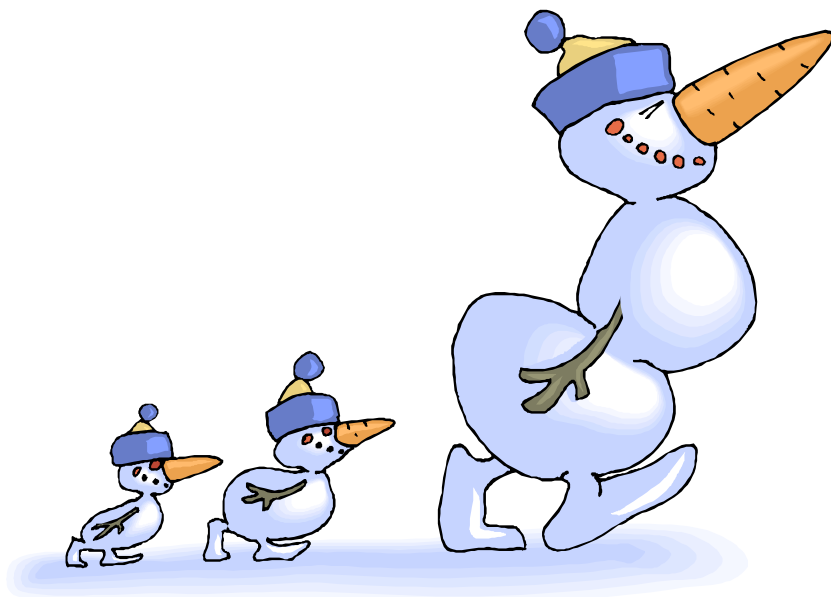
by Barbara Robinson

A Novel Teaching Pack

by Margaret Whisnant

with

Chapter Summaries
Before-You-Read Activities
Vocabulary
Short Answer Questions
Objective Tests
Think, Write, Create Open-Ended Activities
Graphic Organizers
and
Full Answer Keys



The Herdmans:

Imogene, Ralph, Leroy, Claude, Ollie, and Gladys

Rap Sheet:

They lie, steal, smoke cigars, talk dirty, hit little kids, cuss their teachers,
take the name of the Lord in vain, and set fires.
Armed and Dangerous

Father:

Missing

Mother:

Working double shifts

Prognosis:

Hopeless

Enter

Mother:

Producer
of
chaos, change
and

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever



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Chapter Summaries

1

- The Herdmans lie, steal, smoke cigars, talk dirty, hit little kids, cuss their teachers, take the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to things. They accidentally burn down Fred Shoemaker's old toolhouse while playing with a chemistry set, which Leroy stole. They hang around to watch and to steal the doughnuts brought for the firemen.
- The fire chief hopes the neighborhood kids will learn a lesson about playing with fire. The Herdmans learn that where there's fire, there's free doughnuts.
- There are six Herdmans—Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie, and Gladys—living over a garage. The sign in their yard says "Beware Of The Cat."
- Claude Herdman takes the cat to his first grade class for Show-and-Tell. It scratches kids, trashes the classroom, and eats two pet mice brought by another student. The hysterical first graders have to go outside and have recess the rest of the day.
- The Herdmans are moved from grade to grade through Woodrow Wilson School. They are never held back a grade. No teacher is crazy enough to have two Herdmans in her classroom.
- Imogene Herdman manages to learn secrets about her classmates and uses the information to engage in blackmail or name calling. She uses her skills to become the owner of an expensive charm bracelet, a pocketbook, and ten cents a week. Thanks to Imogene, the other students call Alice Wendleken "Cooties" for a year.
- If she doesn't know a secret about someone, Imogene makes one up. It is useless trying to tease the Herdmans because they don't care about the things they do. It doesn't matter to them their father climbed on a railroad train and disappeared when Gladys was two years old.
- Mrs. Herdman works double shifts at a shoe factory and isn't home much. She refuses help from social services that would allow her to work one shift and spend more time with the children.
- The Herdmans pretty much look after themselves—the older one looking after the one younger than him or her. Gladys, the youngest, is the meanest of all the Herdmans.
- Everyone figures the Herdmans are headed straight for hell by way of the state penitentiary until they get themselves mixed up with the Christmas pageant.

2

- Usually, Mother's only involvement with the Christmas pageant is forcing her daughter and her son to be in it and making her husband go see it.
- Everything changes when Mrs. George Armstrong falls and breaks her leg two weeks before Thanksgiving. In delegating Mrs. Armstrong's many duties to other people, Mother gets stuck with the Christmas pageant.
- The Christmas pageant script is always the Christmas story—the inn, the stable, the shepherds, the star. The costumes never change and neither does the casting, including the minister's son as Joseph and Alice Wendleken as Mary.
- Mother says the Christmas pageant is a tradition, and she doesn't plan to change anything.
- Children look forward to Sunday as a day of rest at church away from the Herdmans. Nobody thinks about them in connection with the Christmas pageant.
- Charlie changes things for his mother and the Christmas pageant when he tells Leroy Herdman to go ahead and take his dessert because he gets all he wants in Sunday school. The very next Sunday, the Herdmans come to Sunday school looking for refreshments. They stay when they see the food that is being collected as a Thanksgiving present for the Orphans Home. Imogene takes money from the collection basket.
- At the end of the morning, Mrs. Grady announces to each class that rehearsals for the Christmas pageant will begin the next week. The Herdmans are big moviegoers, and Imogene is interested.

Word List with Definitions

(Listed in story order. Some words may appear on more than one page.)

- vain** In an improper or irreverent manner; to no purpose; futile; excessively proud of or concerned about one's own appearance, qualities, or achievements, etc.; conceited. *homophones: vein and vane* (p. 1)
- clonked** Hit hard, especially on the head; beat; thumped. (p. 4)
- aquarium** A glass-sided tank, bowl, or other water-filled enclosure, in which fish or other living aquatic animals or plants are kept. (Distinguished from *terrarium*.) (p. 5)
- hysterical** Experiencing uncontrollable outbursts of emotion or fear or panic, often characterized by irrational weeping or laughter; agitated; berserk; upset. (p. 7)
- contagious** Capable of being transmitted by bodily contact with an infected person or object; tending to spread from person to person; catching; communicable. (p. 9)
- blackmail** To extort money (or other payments) from another by use of threats; extortion. (p. 10)
- souvenir** A usually small and relatively inexpensive article given, kept, or purchased as a reminder of a place visited, an occasion, etc.; memento. (p. 11)
- penitentiary** A place for imprisonment, reformatory discipline, or punishment, especially a prison maintained by a state or federal government for serious offenders. (p. 14)
- pageant** An elaborate public spectacle that illustrates the history of a place, institution, religious celebration, or the like. (p. 14)
- contribution** Money, time, knowledge, assistance given to a charity, organization, or fund; worked as an important factor in; helped to cause something to happen; donations; offerings; gifts. (p. 16)
- bazaar** (also **bazar**) A sale of miscellaneous contributed articles to benefit some charity, cause, or organization; a market consisting of a street lined with shops and stalls, especially one in the Middle East. {distinguished from **bizarre** by pronunciation: *bazaar* (bə.zār') *bizarre* (bī.zār')} (p. 17)
- standard** An approved model; an object that is regarded as the usual or most common size or form of its kind; accepted; normal; customary. (p. 17)
- tradition** Something that is handed down from one generation to another, as customs, beliefs, legends, information, etc.; custom; heritage. (p. 19)
- congregation** An assembly of people brought together for common religious worship; assembly; audience; gathering. (p. 19)
- shrugged** Raised and contracted the shoulders, expressing indifference, doubt, disdain, etc. (p. 21)
- sentiment** A thought, view, or attitude, especially one based mainly on emotion rather than reason. (p. 21)
- practical** Sensible; suitable or capable of being put into effect; workable; realistic; useful. (p. 21)
- slouching** Moving or walking with a loosely drooping body posture and a careless gait; sitting or standing in a drooping posture. (p. 22)
- sympathize** To share a feeling or have a compassion for, as for suffering or trouble. (p. 31)
- volunteer** To offer oneself for a service without pay; a person who performs a service willingly without pay. (p. 32)

Dictionary Digs

Dig into a dictionary for answers to the following questions about some special vocabulary words from *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. Write the **letters** of the correct answers in the blanks to the left.

- _____ 1. Which of the following is probably **not** a situation that would cause a person to become **hysterical**? (A) a kitchen fire, (B) winning a large amount of money, (C) watching your favorite television program with your best friend.
- _____ 2. Which of the three possible words can be substituted for **practical** in the following sentence without changing its meaning?
*Asking for Dad's advice is the most **practical** solution to our tree-house construction problems.* (A) sensible, (B) embarrassing, (C) difficult
- _____ 3. What is the job of a **truant** officer? to deal with students who (A) live in extreme poverty, (B) stay away from school without permission, (C) move often and miss too much school.
- _____ 4. In addition to a *flat-bottom vessel, usually pushed or towed*, the word **barge** also means (A) to push one's way in rudely, (B) a medal emblem worn by police officers as identification, (C) expressing one's opinion.
- _____ 5. Who is likely to live in a **parsonage**? a (A) custodian, (B) government official, (C) pastor
- _____ 6. Which of the following is something **not** generally thought of as **contagious**? (A) a bad sunburn, (B) laughter, (C) the flu.
- _____ 7. An *antonym* of **sympathize** is (A) disapprove, (B) console, (C) synthesize.
- _____ 8. Which of the following phrases is the **best** example of the correct use of the word **contribution**? (A) an honest **contribution**, (B) a charitable **contribution**, (C) the **contribution** hidden in his words.
- _____ 9. Of the three homophones **vain**, *vein*, and *vane*, which one means *in an improper or irreverent manner*? (A) vain, (B) vein, (C) vane.
- _____ 10. What is the difference between a **volunteer** and an *employee*? (A) an employee works for a business; a volunteer works for a charity, (B) a volunteer is usually in a supervisory position; an employee is a member of the work force, (C) an employee gets paid for working; a volunteer does not get paid for working.
- _____ 11. What is unique about a **collapsible** chair? It (A) can seat more than one person, (B) can be folded for storage, (C) is sturdier than regular chairs.
- _____ 12. A *synonym* for the word **ridiculous** is (A) unbelievable, (B) serious, (C) absurd.
- _____ 13. A good example of a literary character who is also a **villain** is (A) Lord Voldemort, (B) Batman, (C) Harry Potter.
- _____ 14. If someone has been **clonked**, what has happened? He or she has been (A) promoted to another grade, (B) removed from a sports team, (C) hit on the head.
- _____ 15. What is the **main** difference between an **aquarium** and a *terrarium*? An aquarium always contains (A) plants, (B) animals, (C) water.
- _____ 16. Which one of the three word choices correctly completes the following sentence?
*Melanie haughtily **shrugged** her _____ and walked away.*
(A) nose, (B) shoulders, (C) feet
- _____ 17. Which is the *most likely* place to find a **congregation**? (A) at a sporting event, (B) in a movie theater, (C) in a church.
- _____ 18. An *antonym* of **disgraceful** is (A) shameful, (B) fanciful, (C) admirable.

Short Answer Questions

1

1. What did the Herdmans do that made them absolutely the worst kids in the world?
2. How many Herdmans were there, and where did they live?
3. What did Claude Herdman's cat do the day he brought it to first grade for Show-and-Tell?
4. How did teachers avoid having two of the six Herdmans in one classroom?
5. How did Imogene gain possession of Wanda Pierce's charm bracelet, Lucille Golden's imitation alligator pocketbook, and ten cents a week from Floyd Brush?
6. What information did Imogene learn about Alice Wendleken, and how did she use it?
7. Where was the Herdmans' father?
8. What did Mrs. Herdman do when a social worker tried to get some welfare money so she wouldn't have to work two shifts at the shoe factory?
9. Who looked after the Herdmans?
10. Until they got themselves mixed up with the church and the Christmas pageant, where did it seem they were headed?

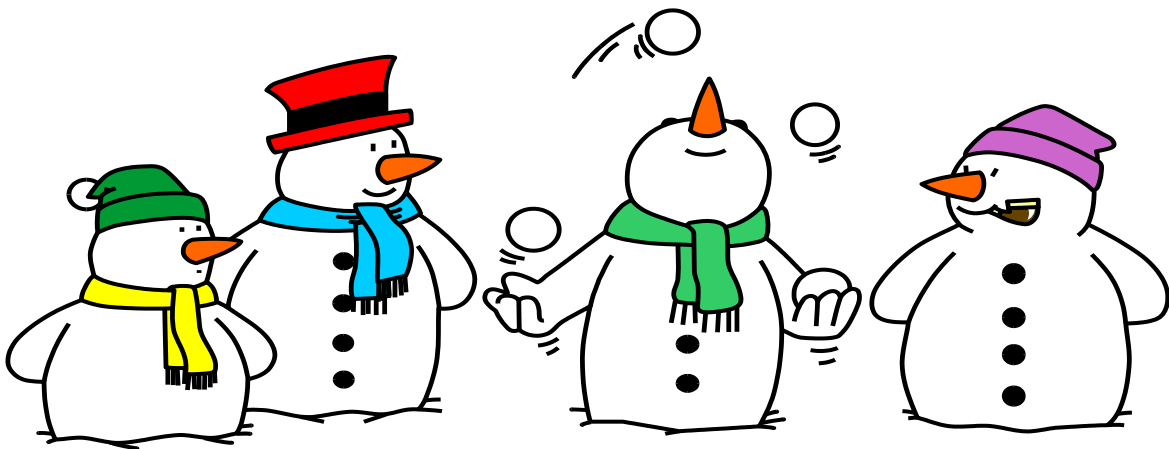
2

1. Before she was put in charge of it, what had been Mother's connection to the Christmas pageant?
2. What event prevented Mrs. George Armstrong being in charge of the Christmas pageant as usual?
3. What was the standard casting for the Christmas pageant?
4. What suggestion did Father make as a way to make a change?
5. What happened the year Alberta Bottles whistled "*What Child Is This?*" for a change of pace?
6. What did Charlie say when he stood up to tell what he liked best about Sunday school?
7. How did the Herdmans get the idea that they would get dessert if they went to Sunday school?
8. On the first Sunday they came to church, why did the Herdmans find all kinds of food in the kitchen?
9. How were the Herdmans able to go to movies without paying their way?
10. What did Imogene say when she was told that the Christmas pageant was about Jesus?

Chapter 1
Pages 1- 4

Write the **letter** of the correct answer in the space before each question.

- _____ 1 . Which of the following was not a Herdman behavior? (A) smoking cigars, (B) using bad language and cussing their teachers, (C) stealing cars.
- _____ 2. The Herdmans set fire to Fred Shoemaker's toolhouse when they were (A) playing with a chemistry set, (B) smoking, (C) building a camp fire.
- _____ 3. What lesson did the Herdmans learn from the fire? (A) Fires are dangerous. (B) Where there is a fire, there are free doughnuts. (C) Always leave the scene of a crime.
- _____ 4. Where did the Herdmans live? (A) over a garage, (B) in an old house, (C) in an abandoned bus.
- _____ 5. What did Claude Herdman take to his class for Show-and-Tell? (A) his chemistry set, (B) his baby sister Gladys, (C) his cat.
- _____ 6. Why did the Herdmans never get held back a grade? (A) They were smart. (B) There was always another one coming along, and no teacher wanted two of them. (C) Their mother wouldn't allow it.
- _____ 7. Imogene terrorized her classmates by (A) hitting them, (B) learning secrets about them, (C) telling lies about them.
- _____ 8. What happened to the Herdmans' father? (A) He was in jail. (B) He divorced their mother. (C) He climbed on a railroad train and disappeared.
- _____ 9. Who looked after the Herdmans while their mother worked double shifts? (A) their grandmother, (B) Social Services, (C) They looked after themselves.
- _____ 10. Why was the youngest of the six Herdmans the meanest? (A) She was abused. (B) She learned from the older ones. (C) She missed her father.



Chapter 2

Pages 15-24

Write either **True** or **False** in the blank before each statement.

- _____ 1. Usually, Mother's contribution to the Christmas pageant was getting Father to go.
- _____ 2. Mrs. George Armstrong, who had always been in charge of the Christmas pageant, had to leave town to visit her daughter.
- _____ 3. The Christmas pageant was an entirely different program every year.
- _____ 4. Charlie's favorite thing about Sunday school was that there were no Herdmans there.
- _____ 5. Charlie told the Herdmans he got all the dessert he wanted at Sunday school.
- _____ 6. The Herdmans showed up at Sunday school because they thought they would get refreshments.
- _____ 7. Imogene put a few coins in the collection plate.
- _____ 8. The parts everyone had in the Christmas pageant changed from year to year.
- _____ 9. The Herdmans were interested in the play because they were big moviegoers.
- _____ 10. The Herdmans used what little money they had to pay their way into the movie theater.





Whole Book Test

Write the **letter** of the best answer in the blank before each question.

- _____ 1. Which of the following statements is **not** true of the Herdmans? (A) They smoked cigars and cursed their teachers. (B) They stole a car and spray-painted houses. (C) They lied, stole, and hit little kids.
- _____ 2. Why did the garage door under the Herdmans' house bang up and down? (A) It was broken and the wind blew it around. (B) The Herdmans were constantly running in and out of the garage. (C) The Herdmans were trying to squash one another.
- _____ 3. What happened to the Herdmans' father? (A) He was killed. (B) He got on a railroad train and disappeared. (C) He was working in another country.
- _____ 4. Who looked after the Herdmans while their mother worked double shifts? (A) They looked after themselves. (B) their grandmother, (C) a neighbor.
- _____ 5. The meanest Herdman was (A) Imogene, the oldest, (B) Ralph, the oldest boy, (C) Gladys, the youngest.
- _____ 6. No Herdman ever failed a grade because (A) the teachers didn't want two Herdmans in a class, (B) they were good students, (C) their mother wouldn't allow them to be held back.

Think, Write, Create

Chapter Activities



1

The Herdmans *lied, stole, smoked cigars, talked dirty, hit little kids, cussed their teachers, took the name of the Lord in vain, and burned down a toolhouse.*

- If you took part in just **one** of the Herdman's transgressions, what would happen to you?
- Suppose someone in your class committed a Herdman act of disobedience at school. What kind of trouble would he or she be in?
- Of all the things on the Herdman bad behavior list, which one do you think is the absolute worst? Explain your choice.

In a functioning society there are rules that must be followed in order for everyone to be safe, happy, and productive. *Do not set fire to someone else's property* is a good example.

The Herdmans ignored the usual rules of conduct, preferring to abide by their own concept of etiquette. What are **four** rules that the Herdmans seem to have created as guidelines for their interpersonal relationships? (*Lie when you need to*, for example.) Use events from the story as proof that one or more of the Herdmans was following each rule. Write a composition about **The Herdman Code of Ethics**. (See **Graphic Organizer #1**)

Leroy Herdman stole a chemistry set, which he later used to accidentally burn down Fred Shoemaker's old toolhouse. This makes him both a thief and an arsonist. However, the fact that he stole a chemistry set and how he used it are clues to a *good* (maybe even *normal*) part of his personality.

- Explain how the fiasco with the chemistry set proved that Leroy was intelligent, inquisitive, and self-motivated. For example, why did he steal a chemistry set instead of a candy bar or a toy car?
- How did Leroy's behavior indicate that he is inclined to criminal behavior? Do you think Leroy knew the difference between *criminal* and *acceptable* behavior? Was he *choosing* one over the other? Explain your thinking.

The result of Claude Herdman's decision to take his cat to Show-and-Tell was a wrecked classroom and a group of hysterical first graders who had to have recess for the rest of the day.

- Find the clue that proves Claude Herdman intended to create a ruckus in his classroom with his cat. How did Claude's plan show his lack of regard for the safety of people and animals?
- On the positive side, how did Claude's Show-and-Tell project indicate that he was creative, had a sense of humor, and knew the importance of planning ahead?

Whole Book Activities

Charlie's teacher was not pleased when he told the truth and said the thing he liked best about Sunday school was that there were no Herdmans.

- Charlie's parents didn't punish him for upsetting his teacher. Do you think they made the right decision? Why or why not?
- In your opinion, is it **always** correct and polite to tell the exact truth? Explain your thinking.
- Explain how Charlie was able to beat the Herdmans at their own game with his fib about all the dessert they would find at church.

Mrs. Herdman "disciplined" her children by not being around and allowing them to do as they pleased. As a result, the children had a warped notion of proper behavior.

- Many parents use some or all of the following methods for teaching their offspring how to behave in a socially acceptable manner:

heart-to-heart talks
rewarding good behavior
praise
time out
grounding
taking away privileges
taking away possessions
requiring payment or work as restitution

- Consider **each** tactic and explain why you believe it **would** or **would not** have been an effective technique for the Herdman children as they were **before** the Christmas pageant.
- How do you suppose the same strategies would have worked for the Herdmans **after** their experience in the Christmas pageant?
- If one of the adults in your life had the responsibility of taming the Herdmans, what do you think he or she would do first? Would the children be approached as a **whole group** or as **individuals**? What predictions would you make for the Herdmans once they were under this person's guidance?

People sometimes say that children are "going through a phase" when they do bad or unusual things.

- Talk to several adults and ask them for examples of "phases" that children go through.
- Based on the data that you gathered, do you think the Herdman behavior was a "phase" that they would have outgrown if they hadn't stumbled into church and the Christmas pageant? Why or why not?

On the surface Imogene Herdman and Alice Wendleken were complete opposites. But on certain points, they were very much alike. Both girls felt a need to control situations and people, but their methods of doing so were quite different. Imogene and Alice shared a sense of right and wrong, but their applications of this common trait didn't match. Each girl was a combination of good and bad qualities, but outwardly one seemed to be all bad and the other all good.


Use the ideas in the paragraph above to make notes about how Alice and Imogene's shared characteristics got lost in their outward behavior. Write a composition about **Sugar and Spice: Alice Wendleken and Imogene Herdman**. (See **Graphic Organizer #8**)

The Herdman Code of Ethics


In a functioning society there are rules that must be followed in order for everyone to be safe, happy, and productive. *Do not set fire to someone else's property* is a good example.

The Herdmans ignored the usual rules of conduct, preferring to abide by their own concept of etiquette. What are **four** rules that the Herdmans seem to have created as guidelines for their interpersonal relationships? (*Lie when you need to*, for example.) Use events from the story as proof that one or more of the Herdmans was following each rule. Organize your ideas on the form below and write a composition about **The Herdman Code of Ethics**.

Herdman Rule Number One _____

Proof . . . 

The Second Herdman Rule _____

Evidence of its existence. . . 

A Third Important Guideline _____

How the Herdmans used this rule. . . 

A Fourth Herdman standard _____

How I know the Herdmans were using this rule. . . 