



## Classroom Guide for **THE CAN MAN**

written by **Laura E. Williams**  
illustrated by **Craig Orback**

### Reading Levels

\*Reading Level: Grades 2-3

Interest Level: Grades K-5

Guided Reading Level: M

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 3.4/.5

\*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

### Themes

Homelessness, Compassion, Friendship, Recycling, Working Toward a Goal

### Synopsis

Tim's birthday is just a week away, and more than anything he wants a skateboard. But money is tight, and Tim knows his family cannot afford to buy him a board.

As Tim ponders how he might earn money for a skateboard, he hears The Can Man down the street collecting empty soft drink cans. The clang of the cans in the homeless man's cart gives Tim an idea. He will collect cans too, and cash them in for the redemption money. By the end of the week, Tim has almost enough money for a skateboard. However, when he encounters The Can Man on the street with an empty cart Tim's jubilation turns to concern: The Can Man needs the money he is hoping to get from collecting cans to buy a new coat before the winter weather turns too cold.

After a week collecting cans, Tim is ready to redeem them. The Can Man happens to come along, and he offers to help Tim cart his many bags of cans to the redemption center. After turning in all the cans, Tim stands with a bag full of coins and watches as The Can Man walks away with an empty cart. Seeing the first flakes of snow starting to fall, Tim makes a decision. He runs after The Can Man and gives him the bag of coins. The next day, Tim's birthday, Tim finds a refurbished skateboard outside his front door. As he admires the freshly-painted wood and spins the wheels, The Can Man comes by pushing his cart and wearing a "new" warm coat. He wishes Tim a happy birthday, and Tim thanks The Can Man—for the birthday greeting and for the "anonymous" birthday gift.

Told with honesty and respect, this story will get students thinking about the difference between needs and wants and the satisfaction of helping others.

### **Background**

The author was inspired to write *The Can Man* after seeing a man regularly collecting cans, which he stored in an old shopping cart.

*The Can Man* is especially timely today. Due to the economic downturn and foreclosure crisis that began in 2008, homelessness has been on the rise. Although single men constitute about sixty percent of the homeless population, families constitute about one third of the homeless and are the fastest-growing group of homeless. The purpose of talking about homelessness with students is to enable them to care for others, build compassion, and strengthen character.

Explain that being homeless means that a person or family does not have a place to live. They might be homeless for a day or two or for many weeks or months. A homeless person or family might live in a shelter with a lot of other people, or in a car, or have no structure surrounding them.

Help students understand that being homeless does not mean that a person is bad or that he or she did something wrong. Homelessness is not an illness, and it isn't anything someone wants. It is something that happens to some people who are having a very difficult time and is sometimes caused by bad luck paired with larger economic factors. Also point out that homelessness is not necessarily permanent and often people just need some help to get settled again.

### **Teaching Tip**

You might consider using *The Can Man* as an introduction to a volunteerism unit or a community service day.

## **BEFORE READING**

### **Prereading Focus Questions**

Before introducing the book to students, you may wish to develop background information, tap prior knowledge, and promote anticipation with questions such as the following:

1. What kinds of outdoor activities/sports do you like to do? Do you need special equipment for these activities?
2. Have you ever shared something you wanted to keep all to yourself? What was it? How did it make you feel to share? Why?
3. What is the difference between a need and a want? Can you give some examples?

4. What are some reasons a person might recycle cans? What might the person do with the money he or she gets for cans from a recycling center?
5. Have you ever encountered a homeless person? How did seeing that person make you feel? Why?

### Exploring the Book

Write the title of the book on a chalkboard. Ask students what they think the title means. What do they think a story with this title might be about?

Show students the front cover. Ask why they think the man is holding a can. What can they tell about the boy and the man from the way they are dressed? Ask students what they think the book might be about based on the illustration.

### Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to find out who The Can Man is, what happens to him and the boy on the cover, and what they learn from each other.

### VOCABULARY

Have students write a definition or description for each word or phrase below. Then have students tell or write where and when they last encountered each object.

barrels	bakery	reduced price	crate
skateboard	park	allowance	rubber gloves
redemption center		shopping cart	auto body shop

### AFTER READING

#### Discussion Questions

After students read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop understanding of the content. Encourage students to refer back to the text and illustrations in the book to support their responses.

<b>Literal Comprehension</b>
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1. Who is the Can Man? What is his real name? Why is he called The Can Man?
2. How does Tim know Mr. Peters? How do his parents know Mr. Peters?
3. What does Tim want for his birthday? How does he plan to get it? Why won't his parents buy it for him?
4. How does Tim get the idea for collecting cans?
5. Why does Jamal hesitate before letting Tim work to earn his cans?
6. What does Mr. Peters do when he sees Tim with all his bags of cans? What happens once they get to the redemption center?

**Extension/Higher Level Thinking**

7. Why doesn't Tim think birthday wishes come true? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
8. How do Tim's parents feel about him collecting cans? How can you tell?
9. How does Mr. Peters act toward Tim when they talk about collecting cans? How would you act?
10. Why did Tim give his money to Mr. Peters? Do you think Tim made the right decision? Why or why not?
11. How do you think Tim felt after he gave his money to Mr. Peters? How do you think Mr. Peters felt?
12. How does Mr. Peters use the money Time gives him? How do you know?
13. Where do you think Mr. Peter's got the skateboard? What makes you think so?
14. Why do you think Tim begins calling Mr. Peter's by his name and not The Can Man? Which do you think is more sensitive? Why?
15. What do you think Tim learned from his experience? What did you learn?

**Literature Circles**

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to the ones in the Discussion Question section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for phrases or terms that show what Tim was feeling in different parts of the story.
- The **Illustrator** might create and label visual representations of important terms and places in the story, such as a skateboard and the redemption center.
- The **Connector** might find other stories about homeless people or families.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might find information about ways to help others in the community.

\*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: GETTING STARTED WITH LITERATURE CIRCLES by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

**Reader's Response**

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, essays, or oral discussion. You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work, if they wish to.

1. In what ways is this story realistic? In what ways is it unrealistic?
2. Have students outline the sequence of events in the story. Then ask them to put a star beside their favorite event. Volunteers may then explain to the class why the chosen event was their favorite.
3. Ask students if they have ever personally encountered a homeless person. What happened? How did they react? After reading *The Can Man*, how might they have responded differently?
4. What did you learn from this story? How might you turn what you learned into action?
5. Have students create a chart to compare and contrast Tim, Mr. Peters, and Mike. Have students think about socio-economic circumstances, needs vs. wants, and general character traits.
6. Invite students to write a brief news story or blog entry about what happened and who was involved in *The Can Man*.
7. Ask students to consider why this story is timely and how it perhaps relates to conditions in their own community.

**ELL Teaching Strategies**

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners.

1. Assign ELL students to read the story aloud with strong English readers/speakers.
2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on the students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading:
  - Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first orally, then in writing.
  - Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.

4. Have students give a short talk about what they admire about a character or central figure in the story.

### **INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES**

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas.

#### **Social Studies**

After reading this story, students may find themselves wanting to help out in their community. With students' caretakers' permission, you might see if students might volunteer in the local soup kitchen, organize a food drive, or do a park or street clean up. A great place for a single student to look for volunteer opportunities is [DoSomething.org](http://DoSomething.org), an organization that creates volunteer opportunities that do not cost anything and do not require a car.

#### **Language Arts**

1. Find some newspaper or TV news examples of students helping others. Have students read the clippings and/or watch the news reports. Then ask students to pick the news story that was most interesting and create a short narrative story based on the news.
2. The author of *The Can Man* often uses descriptive language in the story, e.g. whizzed up, clinking like coins, bumped the bags downstairs. Have each student find five (or more) examples of descriptive language from the story that most appeals to him or her. Then challenge students to write their own stories that incorporate this language. Students' stories may be realistic or fantasy.

#### **Science**

1. Let each student do research on reducing, reusing, and recycling. Have each student decide which method he or she thinks is best for the environment and make a list of the positives of his or her chosen method. Then have all students who chose the same method gather and create a chart or poster that illustrates the positives of their chosen method. Display the charts or posters in the classroom.
2. If you do not already have separate recycling bins in the classroom, students may want to set up separate waste baskets or cartons to recycle cans, paper, and plastic. The school janitor could be enlisted to help students learn what kinds of materials are separated and recycled in your community.

**Math**

Have students work with prices or fake money to explore budgeting. Give students a set budget and a list of items they may need or want to buy during a week. Then ask students which items they would choose to buy within their budget and which they will not be able to afford.

**Art**

Give students a paper cut out of a skateboard shape and let each student decorate his or her skateboard with their own words and/or designs. Students may also affix cotton balls to their decorated skateboards for wheels.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Laura E. Williams** is the author of numerous award-winning picture books and middle grade novels. Born in South Korea and adopted by a family in the United States, Williams has since lived and traveled all over the world. She most recently moved to Kenmore, Washington. Visit her on the web at [lauraewilliams.com](http://lauraewilliams.com).

**ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR**

**Craig Orback** is a fine artist who has illustrated many highly praised books for children, several of which focus on historical subjects. In addition to creating illustrations and fine art, Orback teaches children's book illustration and oil painting at local community colleges. He lives in Seattle, Washington. You can find him online at [craigorback.com](http://craigorback.com).

**Book Information**

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**RESOURCES ON THE WEB**

Learn more about **The Can Man** at:

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/379/hc/the\\_can\\_man](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/379/hc/the_can_man)

BookTalk with Laura E. Williams and Craig Orback:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/canman.mhtml>

**Order Information**

**On the Web:**

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/ordering.mhtml> (general order information)

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/379/hc/the\\_can\\_man](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/379/hc/the_can_man) (secure on-line ordering)

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