

## A Shelter in Our Car

written by Monica Gunning  
illustrated by Elaine Pedlar

### About the Book

**Genre:** Realistic Fiction

**Format:** Paperback, \$10.95  
32 pages

**ISBN:** 9780892393084

**Reading Level:** Grade 3

**Interest Level:** Grades K-5

**Guided Reading Level:** Q

**Accelerated Reader® Level/Points:**  
3.2/0.5

**Lexile™ Measure:** AD560L

\*Reading level based on the ATOS Readability Formula

**Themes:** Empathy and Compassion, Families, Mothers, Single Parent-led Household, Overcoming Obstacles and Trauma, Persistence and Grit, Poverty, California, San Francisco, Jamaica, Childhood Experiences and Memories, Conflict Resolution, Courage, Dreams and Aspirations, Economics, Home, Identity, Self Esteem and Confidence, Bullying, Immigration, Homelessness and Being Unhoused, Police Encounters, Kindness and Caring, Hope, African/African American Interest

**Resources on the web:**

[leeandlow.com/books/a-shelter-in-our-car](http://leeandlow.com/books/a-shelter-in-our-car)

### SYNOPSIS

Zettie and her Mama left their warm and comfortable home in Jamaica for an uncertain life in the United States. With Papa gone, Mama can't find a steady job that will sustain them and so they are forced to live in their car. But Mama's unwavering love, support, and gutsy determination give Zettie the confidence that, together, she and her mother can meet all challenges.

Monica Gunning's moving and authentic story about homelessness in an American city was developed with the help of the Homeless Children's Network in San Francisco. Elaine Pedlar's strong and lively illustrations bring the story to life in vibrant chalk pastel.

All guided reading level placements may vary and are subject to revision. Teachers may adjust the assigned levels in accordance with their own evaluations.

## BACKGROUND

### Information about Homelessness from the Author

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (<https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-2020/>), about 3 million people in the United States lack homes at some time during the year. Almost half of these people are school-age children. The causes of homelessness vary widely, from the high cost of housing, to low wages or unemployment, to mental or physical illness. Regardless of the reasons for their situation, homeless children and adults frequently find themselves struggling to survive and to meet their basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, and education.

Monica Gunning was inspired to write *A Shelter in Our Car* while volunteering with her church to feed the homeless. The experience left her with a renewed understanding of people in that situation. "I realized some were victims of circumstances, like the death of a parent or loss of a job," she says. "Children need to know that homelessness can happen to anyone." With guidance and input from the Homeless Children's Network in San Francisco, Monica was able to create an authentic and compassionate story about the lives of people often ignored by society.

### Additional Information and Resources about Homelessness

*The New York Times* offered a roundup of ideas and links for talking with children about homelessness: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/25/us/california-homelessness-kids.html>. While dated, "Unsheltered Lives: Teaching About Homelessness in Grades K-12" offers a wide range of resources, lesson ideas, and portrayals of homeless individuals in different circumstances. See <https://cotsonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Unsheltered-Lives-2010.pdf>.

The National Coalition for the Homeless has a Teaching Resources page that lists guides, manuals for educators and families, videos, and more, all in efforts to dispel the negative stereotypes surrounding homelessness and people experiencing homelessness. The National Coalition for the Homeless has additional articles about advocacy and ways to that you can help others in your community (<https://nationalhomeless.org/references/teaching/>).

### Discussing Homelessness with Students

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. You might consider using *A Shelter in Our Car* as an introduction to a volunteerism unit or a community service day.

### NOTE

Be cognizant of the students in your classroom and aware of students' living circumstances prior to reading *A Shelter in Our Car*. Would this text be triggering for any students who have been homeless or are currently experiencing homelessness?

Sesame Workshop launched the Sesame Street in Communities initiative and offers resources for providers and caregivers on discussing homelessness with children (<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/family-homelessness/>), including specific articles for children experiencing homelessness and for children not experiencing homelessness.

*A Shelter in Our Car* and the questions and activities in this guide help expose children to the realities of homelessness in the United States. However, you may have children in your classroom who are currently homeless or who have been homeless in the past. In either situation, be sure to lead these activities in a manner that is sensitive to the needs and emotions of your students and that demonstrates respect, rather than pity, for people without homes.

## BEFORE READING

### Prereading Focus Questions

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)  
(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background knowledge and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

- What is a shelter? Why do people need shelter? If someone doesn't have their own home, how might they find shelter? What does "homeless" mean? What do you wonder about homelessness?
- What might be hard for a family when the parent (or parents) aren't able to find a job, or the work they do pays very little money?
- How can families or friends support each other during difficult times? What's a time when someone helped or supported you that made a difference to you?
- What are the most important feelings or characteristics of "home" to you?

## Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1; Craft & Structure, Strand 5; and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)  
(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

- Talk about the title of the book. Then ask students what they think this book will most likely be about and whom the book might be about. What do they think might happen? What information do they think they might learn? What makes them think that?
- Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: front and back covers, author/illustrator biography (on jacket back flap), title page, dedication, illustrations, and author's note.

## Setting a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

Have students read to find out:

- more about Zettie and her mom as characters
- what it's like for Zettie and her mom to live in their car
- what helps Zettie and her mom succeed during a difficult time

Encourage students to consider why the author, Monica Gunning, would want to share this story with young people.

## VOCABULARY

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 4)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

The story contains several content-specific and academic words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below.

Encourage a variety of strategies to support students' vocabulary acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word. (Many of the Spanish words can be found in the book glossary, but there are also some that are not included. Students could be encouraged to create a log of these words—they will not be listed here.)

### Content Specific

"For Rent sign," apartment, plats, ice chest, cocoa beans, community college, Temporary Agency, Health Fair, church shelter, foster home, cafeteria, motel

### Academic

shelter, sternly, steady, scurry, rummaging, bully, afford

## AFTER READING

### Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and/or illustrations in the book to support their responses. **To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite textual evidence with their answers.**

### Literal Comprehension

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

1. What happens to Zettie and her mom as the story starts? How does Zettie feel when she hears the sirens?
2. What happens when Zettie and her mom park on Chandler Avenue? How does Zettie feel? What do they do next?
3. What have you learned so far about Zettie and her mom's life story?
4. How does Zettie get ready for school? How is her morning routine different than if she lived in a house or apartment?
5. What does Zettie ask her mom to do when they get to school? Why? How does her mom respond?
6. After school, what do Zettie and her mom talk about? How does Zettie feel?
7. What does Zettie do at the park?
8. Why do Zettie and her mom prefer their car to a church shelter?
9. What happens when Zettie is waiting for her mom after school? How does she respond? What happens when her mom comes?
10. How does Mam surprise Zettie when she finally finds her after school? What news does she share?

### Extension/Higher Level Thinking

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 2 and 3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4 and 6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

1. How are Zettie's memories of Jamaica different than her live in the United States? How can memories be both comforting and make you feel sad?
2. What do you think Mama's hopes and dreams are for her family's future?
3. When Mama earns enough money for dinner, why do you think they share their food with friends? What does this show about them as people?
4. At bedtime, how are Zettie and Mama similar to families who have permanent homes, even though they are using their car as a shelter?

5. How does Alex's bullying impact Zettie?
6. How does the police officer help Zettie? How does this experience change her thinking?
7. How do you think Mama feels about her new job?
8. What's different about how Zettie feels when she falls asleep in the motel than when she went to bed in the car? How is her bedtime still the same?
9. Why do you think the author wanted to share this story with young people?

### Reader's Response

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)

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 response journals, essays, or oral discussion.** You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

1. Draw a heart map for Zettie. (For an explanation of heart maps and a template, see (<https://blog.heinemann.com/heart-mapping-at-home-meaningful-authentic-writing>)). What feelings, people, memories, places, things, or questions do you think would be in Zettie's heart, based on the information shared in the text?
2. Reflect on what this story shares about people who experience homelessness. Make a list of questions you have about the problem of homelessness in our world. Then make a list of ideas of ways others' can help those in this situation.
3. What makes a home a home? Even though Zettie and Mama's car isn't the shelter they want to have forever, how does it show some of the characteristics of a home?
4. Revisit the parts of the book that mention Zettie's feelings about her parents. What's a time she felt a lot of love for one of her parents? What's a time she felt angry or sad at one of them? Write sentences or a poem about how you feel different ways about a loved one at different times.
5. When Zettie has to wash her face with ice-cold water, Mama tells her to be brave. Make a list of examples from the text of other ways Zettie was brave in this story.

### ELL Teaching Activities

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English Language Learners.

1. Assign ELL students to partner-read the story with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading between pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader.
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 students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading: 1) Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first

orally, then in writing. 2) Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. 3) Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.

4. Talk about how Mama's new job was good news. Have students give a short talk about a time they or their family received good news. If helpful, provide sentence frames to help students share how they felt before the news, and how they felt after.
5. The book contains some content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose English Language Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

### Social and Emotional Learning

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1-3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4-6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4-6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 6)

Social and emotional learning involves being aware of and regulating emotions for healthy development. In addition to understanding one's own feelings, strong socio-emotional development allows individuals to develop empathy for others and to establish and maintain relationships.

Use the following prompts to help students study the socio-emotional aspects of this book.

1. Flip through the pages of the book and focus on the characters' faces on each page. Describe how their faces look and name the emotions they convey. (You might also notice their body language.) Use sticky notes to label various emotions. Ask students to act out specific sections of the story, using their faces and bodies to help convey how Zettie felt. (Examples: Being woken up in the night, falling asleep with Mama, being bullied, not being able to find Mama, being in the motel.)
2. Discuss some of the strategies Zettie uses to manage difficult feelings (e.g., being with a friend, snuggling up with a family member, focusing on happy memories). Ask students, "How could these strategies help you in your own life? What other strategies could also be helpful?"
3. Revisit the sections of the story that portray bullying. Ask students to brainstorm what they'd like to teach Alex. How could other students have been allies if they'd witnessed Alex's behavior?
4. Discuss how this story might change students' perspectives on homelessness. How might they change their reactions to someone experiencing homelessness, or feel encouraged by Zettie's experiences.
5. This story is told from Zettie's point of view. How would the story be different if it was told from Mama's point of view? What might she think and feel about the events in the book?

## INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Students who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

### English/Language Arts

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- Envision a sequel to *A Shelter in Our Car*. Ask students to think about what would happen in the follow-up story. Who would they choose to write about and why? What would happen in their story? Encourage students to create their sequel with accompanying illustrations.
- Read other books that describe characters who must overcome obstacles, such as comparing *A Shelter in Our Car* with *Sweet Potato Pie* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/sweet-potato-pie>), *My Diary From Here To There/Mi diario de aqui hasta allá* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/my-diary-from-here-to-there-mi-diario-de-aqui-hasta-alla>) and *Gettin' Through Thursday* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/gettin-through-thursday>). What do the characters in the books have in common?
- Read other books that portray people experiencing homelessness, for instance pairing *A Shelter in Our Car* with *The Can Man* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/the-can-man>). Talk about how each book presents different details and circumstances about homelessness, and the importance of considering different perspectives and situations when learning about a social issue.
- Use passages from the book to study narrative writing craft strategies. For instance, review the section about when Zettie and Mama must move their car in the night, or when they get ready for the day in the park to exemplify “show, don’t tell.” See additional articles for support on how to teach students about this particular technique of writing (<https://www.amle.org/BrowsebyTopic/WhatsNew/WNDet/TabId/270/ArtMID/888/ArticleID/138/Activities-for-Image-Driven-Writing.aspx>) ([https://www.csustan.edu/sites/default/files/groups/Writing%20Center/documents/showingvstelling\\_revised.pdf](https://www.csustan.edu/sites/default/files/groups/Writing%20Center/documents/showingvstelling_revised.pdf)). Or, review sections of the text that include Zettie’s internal monologue, thoughts, and feelings. Use these as examples to encourage students to include these elements in their own narrative writing.

## Social Studies, Geography & STEM

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- Post photographs of different types of shelters that people use in the United States. Include familiar structures, such as houses or apartment buildings, as well as structures that might be less familiar, such as hogans, shacks, cardboard boxes, street corners, doorways, lean-to's. Label each picture with the shelter's name and, if possible, its location. Use these pictures to discuss with students the importance of shelter and the characteristics of a successful shelter.
- Review the author's note with students, in which she asks readers to "Research [homelessness] in your community and share what you learn with other people; find out about organizations that work with persons without homes and ask what you can do to help..." As a class, or in small groups, list research questions and formulate an action plan to engage in this work.

## Art

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, and Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- Study with students how the illustrator portrayed feelings via facial expressions and body language in this book. Have students create a self-portrait, or a portrait of someone they care about, in a similar style, with the goal of conveying an emotion through the artwork.

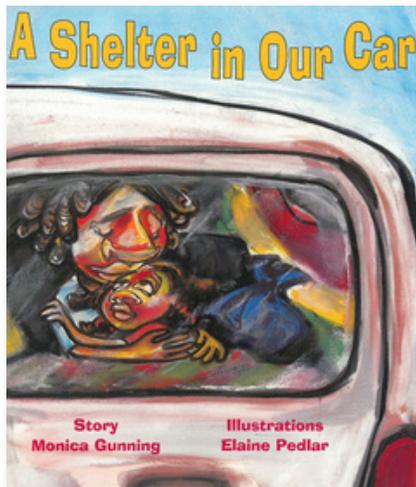
## School-Home Connection

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7-9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1-3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4-6)

- If you research homelessness and related issues in your community with your class and make a plan to contribute to aid efforts, brainstorm ways to involve families. Have students help produce communication for families (e.g., a newsletter, artwork) to update them on your class's work and how they can be involved.
- If possible, arrange visits (in-person or virtual) with local individuals working to combat homelessness (e.g., someone from a local aid organization). Prepare questions with students to help them build more context for understanding the experiences of Zettie and her mother, and also for understanding the specific concerns about homelessness in your area.



## Ordering Information

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Monica Gunning** was born in Jamaica, West Indies, and immigrated to the United States to work and further her education. After graduating, she became a teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The author of critically acclaimed poetry books for children, she has also published extensively in magazines and anthologies. She lives in Laguna Niguel, California.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Elaine Pedlar** was born in Queens, New York, the youngest girl of seven children. She graduated from Parsons School of Design in 1987 and, since then, has been a fashion designer. Single and living in a loft in Brooklyn, she has nine nieces and nephews that she loves dearly. This is her first book for children.

## REVIEWS

"The story is heart-wrenching and an eye opener to maybe those that do not have to live a life of indignities. The illustrations are done with chalk as cartoonish chunky characters. The colors are mainly muted and darker which adds to the overall sadness of the book. The book is targeted to 6+ and much discussion can take place with the reading and rereading of this book. Think about it and read this winner of a book. 5 stars!" –*Reading Authors*

Skipping Stones Honor Award, *Skipping Stones Magazine*

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