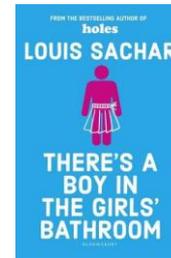


Take 5: Ideas for Independent/Home Learning

There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom by Louis Sachar (Bloomsbury)



Bradley Chalkers sat at his desk in the back of the room—last seat, last row. No one sat at the desk next to him or at the one in front of him. He was an island.

If he could have, he would have sat in the closet. Then he could shut the door so he wouldn't have to listen to Mrs. Ebbel. He didn't think she'd mind. She'd probably like it better that way too. So would the rest of the class. All in all, he thought everyone would be much happier if he sat in the closet, but, unfortunately, his desk didn't fit.

"Class," said Mrs. Ebbel. "I would like you all to meet Jeff Fishkin. Jeff has just moved here from Washington, D.C., which, as you know, is our nation's capital."

Bradley looked up at the new kid who was standing at the front of the room next to Mrs. Ebbel.

"Why don't you tell the class a little bit about yourself, Jeff," urged Mrs. Ebbel. The new kid shrugged.

"There's no reason to be shy," said Mrs. Ebbel.

The new kid mumbled something, but Bradley couldn't hear what it was.

"Have you ever been to the White House, Jeff?" Mrs. Ebbel asked. "I'm sure the class would be very interested to hear about that."

No, I've never been there," the new kid said very quickly as he shook his head.

Mrs. Ebbel smiled at him. "Well, I guess we'd better find you a place to sit." She looked around the room. "Hmm, I don't see any place except, I suppose you can sit there, at the back."

"No, not next to Bradley!" a girl in the front row exclaimed.

"At least it's better than in front of Bradley," said the boy next to her.

Mrs. Ebbel frowned. She turned to Jeff. "I'm sorry, but there are no other empty desks."

"I don't mind where I sit," Jeff mumbled.

"Well, nobody likes sitting ... there," said Mrs. Ebbel.

"That's right," Bradley spoke up. "Nobody likes sitting next to me!" He smiled a strange smile. He stretched his mouth so wide, it was hard to tell whether it was a smile or a frown.

He stared at Jeff with bulging eyes as Jeff awkwardly sat down next to him. Jeff smiled back at him, so he looked away.

As Mrs. Ebbel began the lesson, Bradley took out a pencil and a piece of paper, and scribbled. He scribbled most of the morning, sometimes on the paper and sometimes on his desk. Sometimes he scribbled so hard his pencil point broke. Every time that happened he laughed. Then he'd tape the broken point to one of the gobs of junk in his desk, sharpen his pencil, and scribble again.

1. Explore it

Without sharing the book title, read this story opening. You might want to hear it read aloud as well as reading it for yourself. What do you think is happening in this extract? Who are the central characters? Where is it set? Can you summarise what you've read in a couple of sentences? What questions do you have about it?

Think about the main character, Bradley. In the extract, he is described as *'an island.'* What does this tell us about him? How do you think Bradley feels being in this class? Why do you think this?

How do you think the teacher and the other kids feel about him? Why do you think this? How do they treat him? Is their behaviour fair?

Re-read the extract and think about how this story opening makes you feel. What do you like or dislike about it? Does it remind you of anything you know from stories or real life? How? Think about how it is

written. Do any parts really stick in your mind? Which words and phrases do you like best? What do you like about them? Do they look or sound interesting? Do they help you make a picture in your mind?

2. Illustrate it

Read the text again and think about the different characters in the opening of the novel. What impression are you given of Bradley Chalkers? Which words and phrases help you to imagine him?

What impression do you have of Jeff Fishkin? Which different words and phrases suggest what he is like? Does he seem friendly to you? You might like to highlight or underline the parts of the text that help you to visualise these two different characters.

Now draw a sketch of Bradley Chalkers from Jeff's perspective. What would you need to include in the drawing? What do you think Jeff's first impression of Bradley is? Why? How might you show this in your drawing? What might his body language be like? Do you think he would look confident or shy and nervous? What kind of expression might you draw on his face? Why?

Re-read the opening and write some words and phrases that have helped you make your picture of Bradley. Share what you have drawn with someone else: Why have you chosen to draw him this way? Which words and phrases helped you make a picture?

3. Talk about it

Re-read the opening of the story and consider the relationship between the different characters.

- What do you notice about the way Bradley is treated in the class, is this what you would expect from a teacher and other children?
- Why do you think Bradley would rather sit in the cupboard than in the classroom?
- Why do you think the other children and Mrs Ebbel behave in this way?
- Why do you think he smiles a 'strange smile' as Jeff sits next to him? Why do you think he looks away when Jeff smiles back?
- What do you think Bradley really feels? Why do you think he just scribbles all day? Is this what you would have expected?

4. Imagine it

Imagine that you are Jeff and that you have just joined this class.

- Do you think you'd like to be in this class? Why or why not?
- What might you ask the other children and Mrs Ebbel?
- Do you think you might behave differently from the children in this class?
- How do you imagine they will make you feel welcome?
- Would you talk to Bradley? What might you say or ask?
- What do you think would be a better way to behave towards Bradley?

5. Create it

Thinking about the experiences of Bradley and Jeff, can you create a list of ways in which a class can make someone feel welcome, either a new student or someone who is finding school challenging? What would make people feel welcome? What behaviour would help someone to feel more confident and happier in a new space?