

"Pedro is stumped. His head is "...as empty as a piggy bank with no money in it."

Antonio Skarmeta



### **The Composition**

Antonio Skarmeta  
Alfonso Ruano [Illustrator]  
Groundwood Books 2000

#### **Grade Levels**

3-6

#### **Curriculum Area**

Language Arts • Social Studies

#### **National Language Arts Standards NL-ENG.K-12.8**

#### **DEVELOPING RESEARCH SKILLS**

Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

#### **National Social Studies Standards CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES – THEMATIC STRANDS Culture**

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity.

#### **Individuals, Groups, Institutions**

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions.

#### **Power, Authority and Governance**

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create and change structures of power, authority, and governance.

#### **Objectives**

To provide a range of culturally diverse literature meeting students' needs to understand themselves, understand worldviews and other cultures.

Students will have the opportunity to understand: The form a successful protest might take will vary due to the societal climate and, within the society's particular historical context and contemporary values, the culture's perception of life's meaning and events at that moment in time.

Effective, non-violent civil disobedience involves making unique choices regarding content and process that can be personally liberating and empowering.

The medium can be the message; that is, the medium can determine the successful communication of the message.

#### **Overview**

The Chilean author's short story, first published as an illustrated children's book in Venezuela, provides a chilling portrait of a young boy's political awakening. At age nine, Pedro is most concerned about acquiring a new soccer ball, just like the ones the professional players use. Only after he witnesses a friend's father being arrested and taken away by soldiers does Pedro begin to wonder about his own parents' political leanings. He notices, for example, that they spend a lot of time huddled around the radio with the volume turned low, and they converse with friends in hushed tones. But when he asks his mother if he is for or against the dictatorship, she answers that children aren't for or against anything. So what will Pedro write about when a government

official comes to his school and announces there will be a cash prize for best composition with the title "What My Family Does at Night?" Suspense is built through a skillful use of dialogue and subtle detail, as well as visual foreshadowing in the realistic illustrations, to keep readers on the edges of their seats until the very last sentence. The moral and ethical issues presented provide a tremendous springboard for discussion with older children and adolescents.



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Page 24

### **Activity**

In the story, Pedro has to make a choice about the right thing to do. Ask students to write about an instance when they had to make a hard decision, how they made that choice, and what the results were.

### **Activity**

Chile, a long and narrow country on the west coast of South America, is a varied land. It is a place of rain forests and deserts, of volcanoes and glaciers. It is also a land that has been torn by political and social troubles. These and other aspects of life in Chile appear in the writings of Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral, and Antonio Skarmeta. Pablo Neruda won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1971, wrote many kinds of poetry over his long writing career. Gabriela Mistral also won a Nobel Prize for literature in 1945. She was the first Latin American writer to be honored.

In this activity, your students will experience firsthand the pros and cons of living with a dictator right in their own classroom by having one of their classmates play the role for the day. Discuss with your students what they

believe to be the positive and negative aspects of a dictatorship. List their answers on a chart for later referral. Select one student to serve as dictator for the day. Allow him or her to make many decisions concerning the daily routine of your class (who will be first for lunch, who will get the playground equipment, who is at the front of the line, and so on). At the end of the day, hold a class meeting and discuss the impact of one person making all of these decisions for the class. Add any new opinions to the pro and con pro-and-con chart that you made earlier in the day. Did students' opinions change? Were there any positive aspects to the dictatorship that they had not expected? Continue the class discussion and analyze the experience. Did problems arise that they did not anticipate? How did the person who served as dictator feel about the experience? Was it an easy job? Was he or she worried about others' opinions? How did that student feel when he or she was initially chosen? Did his or her feelings change by the end of the day?

### **Please Note**

Younger students may have difficulty handling this experience. To keep their feelings from being hurt, you can easily use a puppet or stuffed animal as the dictator. Allow this character to "make the decisions" and then hold a class meeting at the end of the day to give students a chance to share their opinions about the experience. After experiencing the dictator for the day dictator-for-the-day activity, have your students write a story that predicts what might have happened if the activity had continued for a week, a month, or an entire school year. What problems might have arisen? How might they have been handled?

[Adapted from Dictator for a Day  
<http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/tlc-ancientrome/>]

### **Activity**

Would the students like to have one student chosen every day to serve as dictator? Using the class chart as a reference, have the students write a persuasive paragraph that supports their opinion about whether or not such a change would benefit the class. After they share their paragraphs, have your students apply their new personal knowledge of dictatorship to The Composition. How do they think people felt about dictatorships at that time? Who would have liked such a system and who would not have liked it? Why?

### **Activity**

Brainstorm with students about what dictatorship is, how it comes about, and the distinctions between dictatorship and democratically elected government. Then have students research in teams aspects of Chilean history: 1) the 1973 coup that overthrew the government of Salvador Allende; 2) the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet; 3) the return to democratic rule in Chile; and 4) efforts to prosecute General Pinochet for war crimes. Discuss their understanding of that history when presented as a whole.

### **Resources**

Baum, Patricia. *Dictators of Latin America*. New York: Penguin Group. 1972.

Antonio Skarmeta. *The Composition*. Groundwood Books. 2000.

### **Internet Websites**

Advise and Consent-Limits of Power  
<http://www.learningtogive.org/lessons/unit3/lesson1.html>

Dictator For a Day  
<http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/tlc-ancientrome>

LANIC, UT Austin  
<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/chile/#history>