

16 If Dogs Had Wings

by Larry Dane Brimner

TOTAL RUNNING TIME

5:58

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The opening interview segment is appropriate for discussions of what causes someone to become an author; how books can educate, entertain, and comfort a reader; and how writing becomes a way of exploring the imagination. Author Larry Dane Brimner shares his love of books and discusses how he has used his writing to learn about the world, share his love of books with schools around the country, and connect with people from all walks of life.

In Brimner's story "If Dogs Had Wings," he uses his imagination to explore the idea of how dogs' lives would change if they could fly. Rather than the view of the world that they have now—a forest of legs with everything interesting just out of reach—they would have a bird's eye view of everything, and they would play among the clouds.

SUGGESTED USAGE—MIDDLE SCHOOL

PRIOR TO THE PROGRAM

Start a discussion with your class based on the sentence string "What if . . .?" Have students, as a group, brainstorm some ideas to go along with a "what if?" scenario, such as: What if people couldn't breathe air, but needed to get oxygen from water the way fish do? How would this change the way the

world works? Encourage them to explore all aspects of civilization from this new perspective. Other topics to consider: How would schools be different? What sports and games would be affected, and how? What would homes look like? How would people cook food, and what would they eat? Instead of roads, what would transportation consist of? And so on.

It is always wise to give your students a specific task while watching a video. This provides a focus for their viewing, so that students are not merely allowing the information to wash over them, but instead are taking an active part in their own learning. Inform students that they will be viewing an episode from a series called *Heroes Read*. In this episode, they will be listening to the observations of an author named Larry Dane Brimner on the subject of writing as a way to explore the imagination. Be sure to preview the video yourself in order to find the best PAUSE points for discussion for your students.

WHILE VIEWING

The interview portion of this episode offers many opportunities for you to segment the viewing of this video in the classroom, using the PAUSE option on your remote to momentarily stop the tape and reflect on information or ideas that Brimner has just offered. Among the many ideas offered by Brimner for discussion is the concept that writers, while observing the world around them, often use the real world as a starting point, exerting their imaginations to take simple events or ideas in a completely new direction. Some questions

sparked may include: Have you ever imagined how the world would be different if some of the rules of physics, like gravity or light waves, didn't apply? How can asking yourself the question "what if?" spark new story ideas? What are some books you can name that are based on this "what if?" scenario?

If you feel the story is appropriate to your classroom, you may also play through the story itself.

AFTER VIEWING

- Replay the beginning portion of the story "If Dogs Had Wings," where Brimmer describes the world through a dog's perspective. Discuss the terms *perspective* and *point of view*. What does each term mean, and why is it important for authors to understand the perspective of the characters in books they write? Have the students discuss how the world looks through other perspectives, such as a fly, a bird, a snake, a newborn baby, and a giraffe. What makes each perspective unique?
- Discuss the way author Larry Dane Brimmer uses events he remembers from his childhood to create stories. Have students create their own stories based on an event in their lives, as Brimmer did with his book, *Elliot Fry's Good-bye* (Honesdale, Pa.: Boyds Mills Press, 1994), which tells what happened when he threatened to run away from home. Have them tell the story from two points of view: that of the main character, and that of a different character in the story (such as a parent or a friend of the main character). How did the story change when the point of view changed?

SUGGESTED USAGE—ELEMENTARY

PRIOR TO THE PROGRAM

To introduce the concept of using the imagination, have the students sit on the floor and imagine that they are dogs, cats, or other

small animals. Ask: If you are a dog, what do you see on your eye level? Can you see what is on the top of a desk or table? Then walk around among the children on the floor and ask them: If you are a dog, what does a person look like from the height you're at right now? What if you wanted something from the top shelf of a bookcase? How would you feel if this were the way the world looked to you?

Inform your students they will be viewing an episode of *Heroes Read* that explores the world through the eyes of dogs, and how the world would look different if dogs weren't always stuck down on the ground. As always with video in the classroom, preview the segment first to find some appropriate PAUSE points to reinforce or develop a specific idea or concept.

If you feel it is appropriate, you may wish to present the opening interview segment as well.

WHILE VIEWING

To reinforce concepts introduced prior to watching the video, PAUSE the video before Brimmer reads the line: "But if dogs had wings . . ." and ask them to list elements of the dog's view of the world (table legs are a jungle, stairs are like a mountain, roads are ribbons that keep going straight ahead, etc.). Write them on the board. Allow the children to become involved in the lesson by telling you when to PAUSE. When each of these elements changes for the dogs, write the change beside it on the board (legs become squashy-looking people far below, stairs are a jumping-off place, roads are braids, decorating the land, etc.).

The story offers many other starting points for discussion with younger viewers, including point of view, empathy, and imagination.

AFTER VIEWING

- Have students write and illustrate their own "what if?" stories, using one of the following story starters.

If kids had wheels instead of feet . . .

If cats could swim . . .

If fish could walk . . .

If I had a neck like a giraffe . . .

If mice were as big as elephants . . .

- Ask your students: What does a blade of grass look like to an ant? What does it look like to a horse? A bird? Have students draw everyday objects from two perspectives: what the object looks like from below, and what it looks like from above. For example, have them sit on the floor and draw a table exactly as they see it; then have them stand and draw the table while looking down on it.

RELATED WEB SITES

THE AUTHOR'S PERSONAL WEB SITE

<http://www.brimner.com/>

Visit Larry Dane Brimner's Web site for book descriptions, school visits, activities, and advice for aspiring writers.

WRITING PROMPTS

<http://www.canteach.ca/elementary/prompts.html>

This Web site from Canada provides teachers with ideas for creative writing topics, including dozens of "what if?" story starters.

THE READING CORNER

<http://ccpl.carr.lib.md.us/read/>

This site, sponsored by the Carroll County Public Library in Westminster, MD, is a source for kids to find newly published works and to check into older classics.