

The Children's Story

... but not just for children

By James Clavell

Adapted by Bryon Cahill

Illustrations by Martin Wittfooth

Characters

Narrators 1, 2, 3

Johnny, an angry student

New teacher

Old teacher

Sandra

Mary

Danny

Joan

Hilda

Brian

Jenny

} students

Narrator 1: It was two minutes to 9. The teacher was afraid. The children were afraid. Little Johnny was filled with hate.

Narrator 2: The old teacher stared at the flag that stood at the corner of the room. But she couldn't see the flag today. She was blinded by her terror.

Johnny: My dad told me that just because they've conquered us, there's no need for panic-fear. He said if you fear too much, you'll be dead ... even though you're alive.

Narrator 3: The teacher ignored him as the sound of footsteps approached and then stopped. The classroom door opened.

Narr 1: A beautiful young girl stood in the doorway. Her clothes were neat and clean, all olive green—even her shoes. She was not a monster at all.

New teacher: Good morning, children. I'm your new teacher.

Narr 2: The new teacher walked to the teacher's desk, and the children in the front row could smell her perfume.

New teacher: Good morning, Sandra.

Narr 3: Sandra blushed and wondered how she knew her name.

Old teacher: I ... er ... I ... good morning.

New teacher: Hello, Miss Worden. I'm taking over your class now. You are to go to the principal's office.

Old teacher: Why? What's going to happen to me? And what about my students?

New teacher: He just wants to talk to you, Miss Worden. You really must take better care of yourself. You shouldn't be so **agitated**.

Narr 1: The old teacher walked slowly to the door. She was crying.

Old teacher: Good-bye, children.

Narr 2: As Miss Worden left the room, some of the children noticed that she was crying, and they too began to weep. Sandra jumped up from her desk and ran to her teacher.

Narr 3: The new teacher shut the door behind the old teacher and swooped up Sandra in her arms. She carried the child back to her desk.

New teacher: Children, children, there's no need to cry! I know. I'll sing you a song!

Narr 1: The new teacher began to sing to the children. The singing calmed them down. Their old teacher had never sung to them before.

Narr 2: When she had finished, she began to tell the children the story of the song.

New teacher: It is about two children who were very afraid

when they lost their way and were all alone in the great prairies. They met a fine man riding a fine horse, and the man told them there was never a need to be afraid. All they had to do was watch the stars, and the stars would tell them where their home was.

Narr 3: Some of the children smiled. Johnny still seemed very angry.

New teacher: For once you know the right direction, there is never any need to be afraid. Fear is something that comes from inside, from your tummies. And good, strong children like you need to put food in your tummies, not fear!

Narr 1: The new teacher looked around the room to see that the children understood.

New teacher: Now, what shall we do? I know—we'll play a game. I'll try to guess your names!

Narr 2: The new teacher went around the room and guessed every child's name correctly.

Johnny: How'd you know our names? I mean, well, we haven't had roll call or anything, so how'd you know our names?

New teacher: That's easy, Johnny. You all sit in the same places every day. Each desk has one pupil. So I learned your names from a list. A teacher must work very hard to be a good teacher, and so I worked for three whole days so that I could know each of you on the

vocab

AGITATED: upset, disturbed

first day. That's very important, don't you think, for a teacher to work hard?

Narr 3: Johnny was astonished that she had worked for three whole days just to know everyone on the first day. But he still hated her.

New teacher: Johnny, would you tell me something, please? How do you start school? I mean, what do you begin with?

Johnny: Well ... we first pledge **allegiance**, and then we sing the song—

Sandra: Yes, but that's after roll call. You forgot about roll call.

Mary: Yes, you forgot about roll call, Johnny.

Johnny: First we have roll call.

New teacher: All right. But we don't really need roll call. I know all your names, and I know everyone's here. It's lazy for a teacher not to know who's here and who isn't, don't you think? After all, a teacher should *know*. So we don't need roll call while I'm your teacher. So we should pledge, isn't that next?

Narr 1: Obediently, all the children got up and put their hands over their hearts. The new teacher did the same.

New teacher and all students: I pledge allegiance to the flag of—

New teacher: Just a moment; what does *pledge* mean?

Narr 2: The children stood openmouthed. They stood and stared at the new teacher. Wordless. **Mute.**

New teacher: What does *allegiance* mean?

Mary: Well, *pledge* is, ah, well,

something like—sort of when you want to do something very good. You sort of pledge you're going to do something like not suck your thumb 'cause that makes your teeth bend and you'll have to wear a brace and go to the dentist, which hurts.

New teacher: That's very good, Mary. Very, very good. To pledge means to promise. And *allegiance*?

'It's lazy for a teacher not to know who's here and who isn't, don't you think?'

Narr 3: Mary shrugged and looked back to her friend Hilda for help. Hilda didn't know either. No one did.

New teacher: I think it's quite wrong for you to have to say something with long words in it if you don't understand what you're saying. What did your other teacher tell you that *allegiance* meant?

Danny: She never said nothing, miss.

Joan: One of my teachers at the other school I went to before this one ... well, she sort of said what it all meant, at least she said something about it just before recess one day, and then

the bell went, and afterward we had spellin'.

Danny: Miss Worden—well, she never told us. We just had to learn it and then say it, that's all. Our real teacher didn't say anything at all.

New teacher: Your teacher never explained it to you?

Narr 1: All the children shook their heads.

New teacher: I don't think that was very good—not to explain. That's what a real teacher should do. But didn't you ask your mommies and daddies?

Mary: Not about "I pledge." We just had to learn it. Once I could say it, Daddy gave me a nickel for saying it good.

Danny: That's right. So long as you could say it all, it was very good. But I never got a nickel.

New teacher: Did you ask *each other* what it meant?

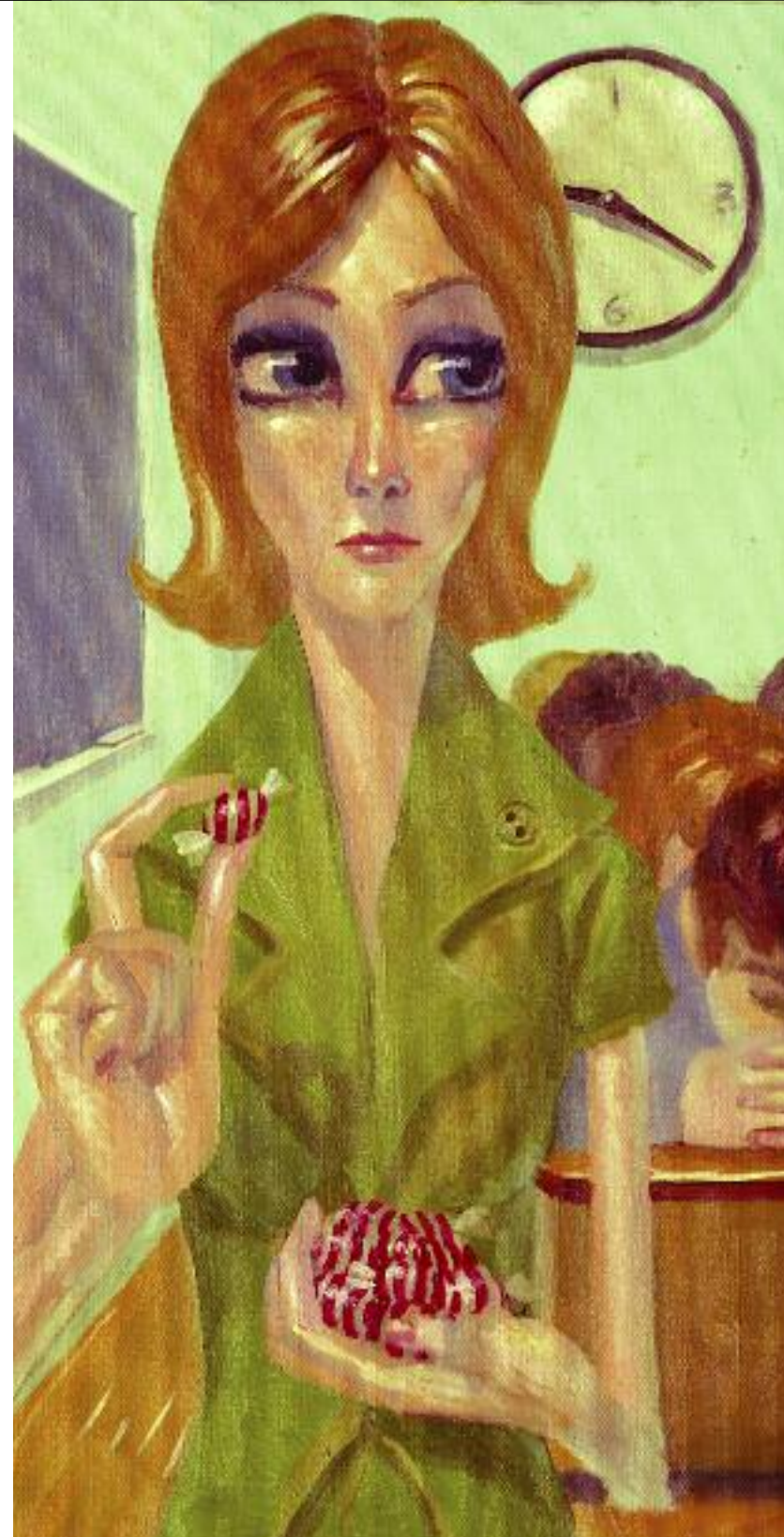
Mary: I asked Danny once, and he didn't know. None of us knew, really. It's grown-up talk. We just have to learn it.

Hilda: The other schools I went to ... they never said anything about it. They just wanted us to learn it. They didn't ask us what it meant. We just had to say it every day before we started school.

Mary: It took me weeks and weeks and weeks to say it right.

Narr 2: The new teacher explained what *allegiance* meant.

New teacher: So you are promising, or pledging, support to the



flag and saying that it is much more important than *you* are. How can a flag be more important than a real, live person?

Johnny: But the next thing is—well, where it says "and to the republic for which it stands"—that means it's like a, like, a ... well ... sort of a sign, isn't it?

New teacher: Yes. The real word is *symbol*. But we don't need a sign to remind us that we love our country, do we? You're all good boys and girls. Do you need a sign to remind you?

Mary: What does *remind* mean?

New teacher: It means to make you remember. To make you remember that you're all good boys and girls.

Johnny: It's our flag. We always pledge.

New teacher: Yes. It is a very pretty one.

Narr 3: The new teacher looked up at the flag for a moment.

New teacher: I wish I could have a piece of it. If it's so important, I think we should all have a piece of it, don't you?

Mary: I have a little one at home. I could bring it in tomorrow.

New teacher: Thank you, Mary dear, but I just wanted a little piece of this one because it's our own special classroom one.

Danny: If we had some scissors, we could cut off a little piece.

Mary: I've got some scissors at home.

Brian: There are some in Miss Worden's desk.

Narr 1: The new teacher went

vocab

ALLEGIANCE: loyalty

MUTE: without speech

over to Miss Worden's desk and found the scissors.

New teacher: Now, who should be the first to cut off a little piece? I know. Because it's Mary's birthday, I think Mary should be the one!

Narr 2: After Mary cut off a piece of the flag, every other child went forward and cut a piece off.

Narr 3: With the flag all cut up, the flagpole was bare and strange and useless. So the teacher and students decided the best thing to do was to push it out the window.

Narr 1: The children screamed with delight as the new teacher opened the window and allowed them to **hurl** the flagpole onto the playground.

New teacher: Well, before we start our lessons, perhaps there are some questions you might want me to answer. Ask me anything you like.

Mary: We never get to ask our real teacher *any* questions.

New teacher: You can always ask me anything. That's the fair way. The new way. Try me.

Danny: What's your name?

Narr 2: The new teacher told them her name, and it sounded pretty.

Mary: Why do you wear those clothes? They are sort of like what nurses wear.

New teacher: We think that teachers should be dressed the same. Then you always know a teacher. It's nice and light and easy to iron. Do you like the color?



‘But it’s right to show grown-ups right thoughts when they’re wrong, isn’t it?’

Mary: Oh, yes. You’ve got green eyes too.

New teacher: If you like, children, as a very special surprise, you can all have this sort of uniform. Then you won’t have to worry about what to wear to school every day. And you’ll all be the same.

Narr 3: The children twisted excitedly in their seats.

Mary: But a uniform’ll cost a lot, and my momma won’t want to spend the money ’cause we have to buy food and food is expen— Well, it sort of costs a lot of money.

New teacher: The uniform will be given to you—as a present. There’s no need to worry about money.

Johnny: I don’t want to be dressed like that.

New teacher: You don’t have to accept a present, Johnny. Just because the other children want to wear new clothes, you don’t have to.

Narr 1: Johnny slunk back in his chair.

Johnny: (*to himself*) I’m never going to wear their clothes.

Mary: Why was our teacher crying?

New teacher: I suppose she was just tired and needed a rest. She’s going to have a long rest. We feel that teachers should be young. I’m 19.

Danny: Is the war over now?

New teacher: Yes, Danny, isn’t that wonderful? Now all your daddies will be home soon.

Mary: Did we lose?

New teacher: We—you and I and all of us—we won.

Mary: Oh.

Narr 2: Johnny suddenly jumped up from his seat.

Johnny: (*screaming*) Where’s my dad? What’ve you done to him? Where’s my dad?

Narr 3: The new teacher walked the length of the room, and the children’s eyes followed her. She stood before Johnny, who was full of hate. His shoulders and his knees were shaking.

New teacher: He’s going to school. Some grown-ups have to go to school as well as children.

Johnny: But they took him away, and he didn’t want to go.

Narr 1: Johnny could feel the tears **welling** in his eyes, and he fought them back.

Narr 2: The new teacher touched Johnny gently. The boy smelled the youth and cleanliness of her. It was not the smell of home, which was sour and a little dirty.

New teacher: He’s no different from all of you. *You* sometimes don’t want to go to school. With grown-ups, it’s the same—just the same as children. Would you like to visit him? He has a vacation in a few days.

Johnny: Momma said that Dad’s gone away forever! He has a vacation?

New teacher: She’s wrong, Johnny. After all, everyone who goes to school has vacations. That’s fair, isn’t it?

Johnny: I can see him?

New teacher: Of course. Your daddy just has to go back to school a little. He had some strange thoughts, and he wanted other grown-ups to believe them. It’s not right to want others to believe wrong thoughts, is it?

Johnny: Well, no, I suppose not. But my dad never thought nothing bad.

New teacher: Of course, Johnny. I said *wrong* thoughts—not *bad* thoughts. There’s nothing wrong with that. But it’s right to show grown-ups right thoughts when they’re wrong, isn’t it?

Johnny: Well, yes . . . but what wrong thoughts did he have?

New teacher: Just some grown-up thoughts that are old-fashioned. We’re going to learn all about them in class. Then we can share knowledge, and I can learn from you as you will learn from me. Shall we?

Johnny: All right. But my dad couldn’t have wrong thoughts. He just couldn’t . . . could he?

New teacher: Well, perhaps sometimes when you wanted to talk about something very important with your dad, perhaps he said, “Not now, Johnny, I’m busy,” or “We’ll talk about that tomorrow.” That’s a wrong thought—not to give you time when it’s important—isn’t it?

Johnny: Sure, but that’s what all grown-ups do.

Mary: My momma says that all the time.

vocab

HURL: to throw

WELLING: rising to the surface

Narr 3: All the children nodded as they wondered whether all their parents should go back to school and unlearn wrong thoughts.

New teacher: Sit down, Johnny, and we'll start learning right things and not worry about grown-up wrong thoughts. Oh, yes ... I have a lovely surprise for you. You're all going to stay overnight with us. We have a lovely room and beds and lots of food, and we'll all tell stories and have such a lovely time.

All children: Oh good!

Mary: Can I stay up till 8 o'clock?

New teacher: Well, as it's our first new day, we'll all stay up to 8:30. But only if you promise to go right to sleep afterward.

All children: We promise.

Jenny: But first we have to say our prayers before we go to sleep.

New teacher: Of course. Perhaps we should say a prayer now. In some schools, that's a **ritual** too. Let's pray for something very good. What should we pray for?

Danny: Bless Mommy and Daddy.

New teacher: That's a good idea, Danny. I have one. Let's pray for candy. That's a good idea, isn't it?

Narr 1: All the children agreed that it was a very good idea indeed. They closed their eyes and put their hands together as they prayed with their new teacher for candy.

Narr 2: The new teacher opened

her eyes and looked around disappointedly.

New teacher: But where's our candy? God is all-seeing and everywhere, and if we pray, he answers our prayers. Isn't that true?

Danny: I prayed for a puppy lots of times, but I never got one.

**'I saw you!
You had them
in your pocket!
We didn't get
them with
praying. You
put them
there!'**



New teacher: Maybe we didn't pray hard enough. Perhaps we should kneel down the way people do in church.

Narr 3: The new teacher knelt, and all the children knelt with her. They prayed very, very hard. But still there was no candy.

New teacher: Perhaps we're using the wrong name. Instead of saying "God," let's say "Our Leader." Let's pray to Our

Leader for candy. Let's pray very hard. Don't open your eyes till I say.

Narr 1: Once again, the children shut their eyes and prayed very hard. The teacher took out some candy from her pocket and quietly put a piece on each child's desk.

New teacher: OK, children, you can open your eyes.

Narr 2: The children opened their eyes and were overjoyed when they saw the candy on their desks.

Mary: I'm going to pray to Our Leader every time!

Hilda: Me too! Could we eat Our Leader's candy now, teacher?

Jenny: Oh, let's! Please, please, please?

New teacher: So Our Leader answered your prayers, didn't he?

Johnny: No, he didn't! I saw you put the candy on our desks! I was peeking! I saw you! You had them in your pocket! We didn't get them with praying. You put them there!

Narr 3: All the children stared at Johnny and then at the new teacher in silence. She stood at the front of the class and looked back at Johnny and then at all of them.

New teacher: Yes, Johnny, you're quite right. You're a very, very wise boy. Children, I put the candy on your desks. So you know that it doesn't matter whom you ask, whom you shut your eyes and pray to—to God or anyone, even

Our Leader—no one will give you anything. Only another human being.

Narr 1: The new teacher looked right at Danny.

New teacher: God didn't give you the puppy you wanted. But if you work hard, I will. Only I or someone like me can *give* you things. Praying to God or anyone for something is a waste of time.

Danny: Then we don't say prayers? We're not supposed to say prayers?

New teacher: You can if you want to, children, if your daddies and mommies want you to. But we know, you and I, that it means nothing. That's our secret.

Brian: My dad says it's wrong to have secrets from him.

New teacher: But he has secrets that he shares with your mommy and not with you, doesn't he?

Narr 2: All the children nodded.

New teacher: Then it's not wrong for us to have a few secrets from them. Is it?

Mary: I like having secrets. Hilda and I have lots of secrets.

New teacher: We're going to have lots of wonderful secrets together. You can eat your candy if you want to. And because Johnny was especially clever, I think we should make him monitor for the whole week, don't you?

Narr 3: All the children nodded happily as they popped candy into their mouths and chewed

vocab

RITUAL: an established routine

gloriously. Johnny was very proud as he chewed his candy. He liked his teacher very much. He sat back and decided he would try very hard to not have wrong thoughts like his dad.

Narr 1: The new teacher sat back and waited for the children to finish their candy. She had been trained well. She looked out the window, at the sun over the land. She imagined every school across the land where all men, women, and children were being taught the same New Faith. The thought warmed her.

Narr 2: The new teacher glanced at her watch. It was 9:23.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JAMES CLAVELL (1924–1994) is best known for his epic sagas such as *Shogun* or *Noble House*. "The

Children's Story" is a departure from his usual format and was inspired by a conversation he had with his young daughter when she came home from school one day. He was struck by how vulnerable and impressionable her mind was, and it got him thinking about the danger that could evolve in a single-minded, controlling environment.

TED THA/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTYIMAGES

WRITE ABOUT IT

- 1 Why was the new teacher encouraging the students to cut up the flag? What does this act tell you about the new government? Write a story that takes place outside these school walls.
- 2 What would you do differently if you were a student in that class? Write an account of how you would have behaved in the new teacher's classroom.
- 3 The events that take place in "The Children's Story" unfold in only 25 minutes. Can you write a story that takes place in 25 minutes? Give it your best shot! When you're done, e-mail your writing to us at word@weeklyreader.com, and write "25-Minute Story" in the subject line. We'll post our favorites on our blog! www.readandwriting.com.