

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Cricket in Times Square by George Selden

## Book Information

George Selden, The Cricket in Times Square

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Interest Level: MG

Chester the cricket resides in a newsstand in Times Square. He has many adventures, climaxing with the rescue of the newsstand owner from financial disaster.

**Award:** Newbery Honor

**Topics:** Recommended Reading, California  
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Chester Cricket

## Main Characters

Chester Cricket a country cricket who finds himself in Times Square

Harry Cat a stray cat; a friend of Tucker Mouse

Mama and Papa Bellini Mario's parents, owners of the newsstand

Mario Bellini a hard-working city boy who finds a cricket

Sai Fong a Chinese man who owns a shop

Tucker Mouse a mouse who lives near Mario's newsstand

## Vocabulary

**bustle** brisk and busy movement

**pagoda** a highly decorated Far Eastern holy building

**scrounging** getting by hunting around for

**thicket** a thick growth of small trees and underbrush

**thrumming** a vibrating sound

## Synopsis

Mario Bellini is a young boy whose father owns a newsstand in Times Square. Mario is working at the newsstand when he finds a cricket he wants to keep

as a pet. His mother does not like the idea, but his father decides he can keep it at the newsstand. After the Bellinis leave, the cricket is visited by a mouse named Tucker who lives nearby. The cricket introduces himself to the mouse as a country cricket named Chester. He tells Tucker that he had been eating in a picnic basket and fell asleep. When he woke up, he was pinned in place by a pile of sandwiches and was being carried onto a train. When he finally freed himself and jumped off the train, he was in Times Square.

Tucker mouse has a friend named Harry who is a cat. Harry lives in a drain pipe with Tucker. They take Chester on a tour of Times Square. The next morning Mario returns to see his cricket.

Mario takes Chester to Chinatown and meets a man named Sai Fong. Sai Fong is delighted that Mario has a cricket. He sells Mario a beautiful cricket cage for fifteen cents, and tells him the story of the first cricket.

One night, Chester dreams he is eating a leaf and awakens to discover he has eaten half of a two-dollar bill. Mama Bellini tells Mario the cricket must stay in his cage until the money is repaid. Chester's friends come to his aid when Tucker offers to give his savings to repay the Bellinis. Mario thinks that Chester is eating money because of something lacking in his diet. He returns to Chinatown to see Sai Fong. He finds Sai Fong with a visitor and is invited to eat dinner with them. He explains his problem with the cricket. The two men confer and Sai Fong tells Mario that crickets like mulberry leaves. Sai Fong has such a tree in his garden and offers the leaves to Mario.

One night Chester has a party in the newsstand. During the celebration Chester learns to perform the music he hears on the radio. Tucker is dancing to Chester's music and the newsstand is set on fire. Mama Bellini blames the cricket. She wants the cricket gone. Papa Bellini and Mario try to change her mind. Chester feels the fire is his fault because he has bad luck. He begins to chirp to make himself feel better. He plays an Italian folksong he had heard the night before. Mama Bellini hears the song

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and is surprised. It was a song that Papa Bellini used to sing for her.

Mario is amazed when he finds his mother singing to the music Chester is making. When Papa returns, Chester is chirping opera. Mama says that any cricket that can make music like that could not have started a fire. That night Chester, Tucker, and Harry decide to find a way to help the Bellinis. Chester listens to the radio to learn more songs. The next day when Mr. Smedley, the music teacher, comes to the newsstand, the Bellinis tell him about Chester. He is skeptical, but Chester soon convinces him. Mr. Smedley says that the whole world should hear the cricket, so he writes a letter to the musical editor of the *New York Times*. The letter is printed in the newspaper and soon people come to hear Chester play.

Business booms at the newsstand. No matter how many extra papers Mama Bellini has delivered, they are sold out each night. Mr. Smedley makes recordings of the music and gives talks on music appreciation during the intermission. Chester is the most famous musician in New York, but he is unhappy. He likes helping the Bellinis, but he does not enjoy being looked at. Fall is coming and he yearns to return to the country. Mario knows that the cricket is unhappy.

Finally, Chester decides to retire. He tells Tucker and Harry that he wants to go home. They plan for his retirement the next day and invite him to a retirement party at their place that night. During the final concert, everything in Times Square comes to a stop and everyone listens to his music. That evening Chester has dinner with Mario and spends the evening playing games with him in the newsstand. Later that night, after saying good-bye to Tucker and Harry, Chester leaves on a train for Connecticut.

The next morning the Bellinis look for Chester. Mario sees that Chester's bell is gone but not the money, so he knows that Chester has gone.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

Why did Chester want to help the Bellinis?

*Mario had rescued him from the dirt when Chester came to New York. Chester felt responsible for the damaged money and the fire. He was grateful to the Bellinis for giving him a home and feeding him. Chester knew Mario was a hard worker and that the Bellinis did not have much money.*

### Literary Analysis

How did the music Chester chose to play the first time for Mama Bellini save him from being sent away?

*The song he chose was an Italian folksong, and Mama Bellini was Italian. This particular song was one that Papa Bellini used to sing for her when he was courting her. He used to serenade her with this song under her window. This song brought all of those happy memories back to her. She sang the song Chester was playing. This really surprised Mario, who had never heard his mother sing.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Why did Chester decide to return to Connecticut?

*Though he loved Mario, he knew he belonged in the country. When summer ended, he felt nature pulling him back to his home. He missed his animal friends and was probably thinking about the coming of winter. His instincts told him that a change was coming, and it would be best for him to return to his natural environment.*

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## Constructing Meaning

What was the point of Sai Fong's story about the first cricket?

*He was sharing the Chinese legend with Mario because Mario liked crickets. The story helped explain why the Chinese honor crickets. Mario had heard that the Chinese had cricket houses; this story told him why. The legend said that the first cricket had been a man who told only the truth. He was in danger, so the gods turned him into a cricket to save his life. The Chinese believe that the crickets are descended from this man, so they are wise and always tell the truth.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** The story was set in Times Square which is located in New York City. Times Square is best known for the New Year's Eve celebration held there every year. Thousands of people gather to watch a lighted ball being lowered as the seconds count down to the New Year. Times Square is just one famous place in New York City. Have a discussion to see what other landmarks the students can name. (the Empire State building, the World Trade Center, Rockefeller Center, the Statue of Liberty, Broadway, Central Park, Wall Street) The students can choose a landmark and do research on what it is and why it is famous.

**Understanding Literary Features** The theme of the story is the importance of friendship. Chester was all alone in a strange place and probably would have died if Mario had not found him. Tucker might not have met Chester if Mario had not found the cricket. Chester was grateful for Mario, Tucker, and Harry. Most of the action in the story involved the friends helping each other. Ask the class to write a paragraph on what it means to be a friend. Why are friends important? How can each of us be a better friend? Perhaps they can share a personal experience about a time when they helped a friend or when a friend helped them in some way.

**Understanding Characterization** Chester was

afraid when he first saw Harry the cat. He was not afraid for himself, but for Tucker, since cats ate mice in the country. Ask the class to think of other animals who are natural enemies, such as dogs and cats, wolves and sheep, or spiders and flies. Have them choose a pair of animals and write a short story about the unlikely pair being friends, perhaps living together and helping each other to survive. How could the smaller animal help a larger animal? What other stories have they read that had similar characters? (the story of the mouse pulling the thorn from the lion's paw, or Disney's *The Fox and the Hound*) Ask why these character pairs make the story more interesting.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** The author used common objects to help the reader see what it would be like to be a mouse or cricket. Mario put the cricket in a matchbox; the mouse used a dollar bill as a blanket. These are two examples of the images from the story. Other stories that use similar images are *The Borrowers* by Mary Norton, *Stuart Little* by E. B. White, and *Thumbelina* by Hans Christian Andersen. In each of these stories, the characters use common objects for their own use in spite of the size difference. The students can think of uses that a small creature or person might have for small objects found in their bedroom or in the classroom. Let them share their thoughts and imaginations with their classmates by bringing in an object and describing how it might be used.