



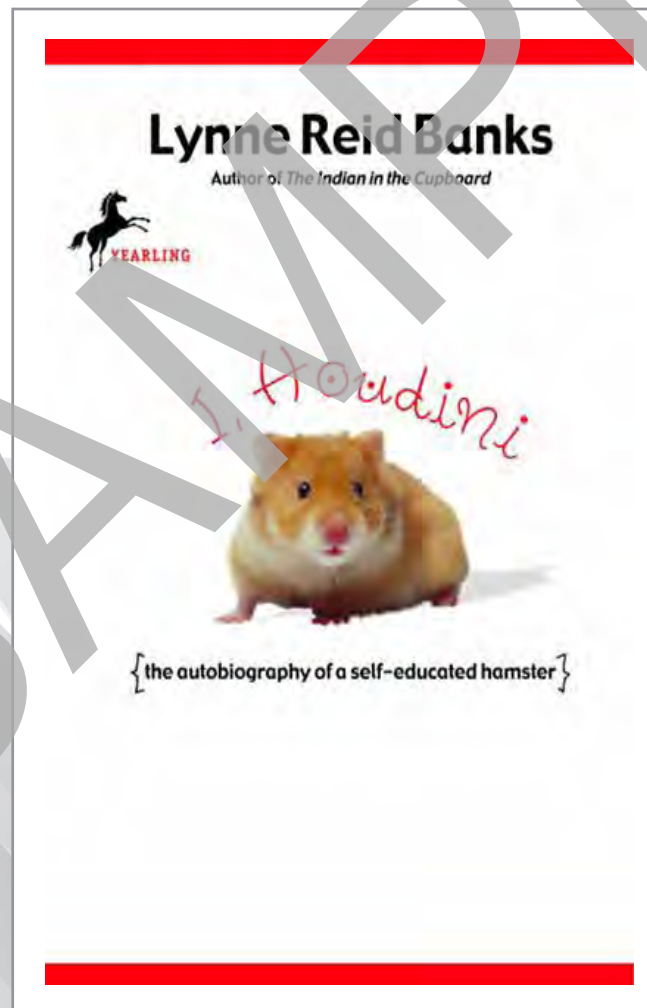
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 3-5

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

I, Houdini: Autobiography of a Hamster

Lynne Reid Banks



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

The Samurai's Tale

Erik Christian Haugaard

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Summary

The hero, a golden hamster who is quite proud of his abilities as an escape artist, announces his intention of telling readers the story of his “life so far.” He made his first escape the night his human family brought him home from the pet store and put him in a cardboard box. After getting out, “Goldy” slipped through a hole in the baseboard, where he stayed until the Father caught him by setting up a trail of food. The three boys—Mark, Adam, and Guy, were delighted to see their pet again, but Houdini didn’t return the sentiment—and, indeed, bit the 5-year-old on the finger.

Later, when Mark picked him up, Goldy took the opportunity to make a second escape and dashed down his pants leg. This time, Houdini explored the inside of the piano, then made a bed in a wastepaper basket nearby until he was detected by the humans and put back in his abysmal bin.

Shortly thereafter, while Adam was letting him romp under the bedcovers, Goldy escaped into the chimney. Soot-covered, he then explored the room, chewing on the carpet, gnawing on the door, and knocking over a cup of water. The next morning the Father was furious to see the damage Goldy had done, and it was agreed that Fanny (the grandmother) should be asked to give her Christmas present—a real hamster cage—early. Upon hearing this, Goldy decided to let himself be captured. At this point, the Mother pointed out that a more fitting name for the hamster would be Houdini—after the famous human escapologist—and Houdini he was dubbed.

Houdini had a close call on his next escape. He dived into a hole near the fireplace and was trapped there, without water, when he found his exit blocked by a pipe that had heated up. Again the humans rescued him, and Houdini found that the cage they had set up was actually quite comfortable; he even enjoyed running on the wheel. But after a few weeks, he found how to pop up the top of the cage—and was free once again. After eating some berries on the mantelpiece, he made a nest under the kitchen floor; all went well until he gnawed a hole in a pipe, causing a flood in the kitchen, and arousing the murderous rage of Father once again. To protect Houdini, the boys loaned him to a neighbor boy—Ben—who wanted to breed his female hamster. Unfortunately, the female was so bold as to bite Houdini. Then when Ben took Houdini outside, Houdini saw his chance for freedom and took it. After nearly being killed by a cat, Houdini went back inside Ben’s house to investigate, fell asleep in the liquor cabinet, and was captured early in the morning by Ben’s father, who had a drinking problem. Ben put Houdini back into the cage with the female, and this time Houdini was successful in wooing her.

Back in his own human house again, Houdini escaped again when the Mother put him in the bathroom for a little exercise. Finding a hole in the wall, he scurried outside and found that the outdoors can be a terrifying place. First he nearly killed himself sliding down the drainpipe. Then he was nearly burned alive in a pile of weeds and was forced to watch the murder of a helpless mouse by an owl. Next he was grabbed by a dog and brought into a smelly house where an irritable man threw him into the refrigerator. His family came to reclaim him, and he was content to stay in his cage for a few days. The inevitable urge to escape returned, and Houdini found his way out of an extension on his cage. In the kitchen, he made a cozy nest in the floorboards and was overcome by fatigue. What he didn’t realize was that it was time to hibernate. On and on he slept until, several weeks later, he emerged—to the delight of the family. The boys took him next door and introduced him to his children—who had arrived while Houdini was asleep.

Now that he is older, Houdini admits at the end, he has adapted to life with the family. He still enjoys his outings, but he is careful not to be destructive. The family, too, has compromised; when he gets out, he is allowed the run of the house—and even the Father has come around to accepting him.

Instructions Prior to Reading

You may wish to choose one or more of the following prereading discussion questions/activities. Each is designed to help students draw from their store of background knowledge about the events and themes they will meet in the story they are about to read.

Prereading Discussion Questions

On freedom: What does it mean for a person to be free? Does an animal deserve to be free? Would you choose freedom over safety?

On having pride: What is the difference between being proud and being conceited? What are some things you are proud of? To whom do you express your pride? Who expresses their pride in you?

On pets: Do you have a pet? Which animals make the best pets? Which animals should probably not be made pets? Why not? What rights does your pet have? What responsibilities do you have toward your pet?

Prereading Activities

Anticipation Guide: Read each of the statements below and explain why you do or do not agree with it. Consider the list again after you have completed the story and see if any of your answers change.

- An animal is better off in the safety of a home than he would be out in the wild.
- Fathers tend to be less patient with pets than mothers are.
- Sometimes it's necessary to deceive people.
- If people would compromise, they'd be happier together.

Concept map: Write the word "HAMSTER" in capitals in the center of a large piece of paper, to be kept for later comparison with events in the book (or as a bulletin board display to be expanded as the story is read). Ask students to come up with as many ideas as they can think of related to the term. Jot the student ideas in a list, then help students organize the list into categories (such as "types of hamsters" and "things hamsters do"). Draw "wagon spokes" around the central concept ("HAMSTERS") to connect it with the supporting ideas (categories).

Role play: Have students role play the following situation, analogous to one in the story.

Your puppy has done a lot of damage to your home, and your father is angry. Act out what you say to each other and how you handle the problem of what to do with the puppy.

Background information on Houdini: To be provided to students, or researched by them. Harry Houdini (1874–1926) was an American escape artist and magician. Born Ehrich Weiss, he took the name of Jean Robert-Houdin, a French magician. Although he started as a trapeze artist, he soon earned an international reputation for his ability to escape from a variety of confinements. Perhaps his most famous act involved hanging upside down in a strait jacket high over Broadway—taking only a few seconds to free himself before an astonished crowd. Once he had himself dropped in a packing case closed with steel tape into a river; 59 seconds later, he reappeared at the surface.

Bulletin Board or Worksheet Ideas

1. Introduce predicting at the start of the novel unit and continue as chapters are read.
2. Have students identify with Houdini, writing the journal entries that he might make throughout the story, if he could write. Entries might include one thing the character learned during the time covered by the chapter, the thing the character liked best about the week, the thing they liked least. Display journal entries on a bulletin board.
3. Have students draw and caption 4-frame picture sequences that summarize key episodes in the story. (The results will resemble comic strips.) Add to the bulletin board display as successive chapters are covered.
4. Help students create a bulletin board display about hamsters which compares how nonfiction and fiction writers approach the same topic. One possibility would be for students to copy passages and illustrations from encyclopedias, pet care books, etc. and place these beside references to hamster behavior and care found in *I, Houdini*.

Recommended Procedure for Reading This Book

This book will be read one section at a time, using DRTA (Directed Reading Thinking Activity) Method. This technique involves reading a section, predicting what will happen next (“making good guesses”) based on what has already occurred in the story. The students continue to read and everyone verifies the predictions.

Initiating Activity

Say to students: Let’s gather some clues about what the story is going to be about. First, has anyone read any other books by Lynne Reid Banks? What kind of stories does she usually write? (realistic fantasy; Almost everything in her books seems as if it could happen in real life—until she introduces some “magic”—a talking Indian figurine, or a hamster who thinks like a human being...) Now consider the title. Who was Houdini? What can his name have to do with the hamster in the picture? What do you think will happen in the story, based on the title, the cover illustration, and what you may already know of Lynne Reid Banks’ stories?

Chapters 10–11, pages 73–88

Vocabulary		
debauch (73)	stealthily (73)	stupor (73)
unaggressive (74)	solitary (74)	mesmerized (75)
intellectual (77)	rebuffed (77)	roguishly (78)
possessive (80)	ventilation (81)	beseeking (81)
moping (81)	documentaries (82)	deplorably (82)
reveled (82)	persecutor (82)	sprinting (83)
studiously (83)	subsonic (83)	palpitating (84)
brink (85)	haunches (86)	hurtling (86)

Vocabulary Activity

- Can a performer sing stealthily? (no)
- Can a window provide ventilation? (yes)
- Can a snake rest on its haunches? (no)
- Can an acorn come hurtling up a hill? (not unless it is thrown)
- Can one friend be possessive of another? (yes)

Discussion Questions

1. How did Ben's father's drinking problem cause Houdini's capture? (*Houdini wasn't expecting someone to open the drinking cabinet so early.*)
2. What was Houdini's plan for getting into Oggi's cage? Did it work? (*Houdini waited outside her cage until Ben found him and—realizing what Houdini wanted—let Houdini into Oggi's cage.*)
3. Back at his own house again, how does Houdini keep from getting bored? (*He exercises and watches TV.*) Is your taste in TV shows more like Houdini's or like the boys'?
4. How does Houdini betray the mother to get outside? Was he wrong to act like that when she had been kind to him? (*She feels sorry for him and lets him out into the bathroom to stretch. He escapes through a hole in the wall and slides down the drainpipe.*)

Prediction: What new dangers do you think Houdini might meet outside this time?

Writing Activity

Write out the conversation the mother has with the boys when they return home to find Houdini gone.

Sociogram

Directions: A sociogram shows the relationship between characters in a story. Complete the sociogram below by writing a word to describe the relationships between the characters. Remember, relationships go both ways, so each line requires a descriptive word.

