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# Teaching Guide to **CALAMITY JACK**

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This fast-paced and compelling follow-up to *Rapunzel's Revenge* uses the graphic novel format to tell a modern fable of redemption, complete with complex world-building and startling imagery. As a title to read independently or as part of your curriculum, *Calamity Jack* features clear and engaging visual storytelling that makes it easy for you to reinforce setting, sequence, genre, and other literary concepts.

## ACTIVATING PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Prepare students to read and discuss *Calamity Jack* by building and/or sharing relevant background knowledge. Review the story of “Jack and the Beanstalk,” particularly its main characters, their motivations and even, in the case of the giant, their catchphrases. Invite students to summarize the fairy tale’s plot as well as that of “Rapunzel,” a key character in the graphic novel. Students familiar with *Rapunzel's Revenge* may also summarize its plot, but please note that reading it is not a prerequisite for reading *Calamity Jack*. You may want to clarify certain aspects related to continuity, such as why Rapunzel’s hair is short here, but otherwise draw attention to the brief synopsis on pages 38 and 39 that helps readers situate the previous adventure within the framework of Jack’s narrative. **1 / 2 / 5.4**



## STORYBOARDING AN ACTION SCENE

Reinforce understanding of setting and character by having students choreograph one of the book’s many exciting action sequences. Have them use the identical starting situation (e.g., pages 72, 90, and 125) and objective, and then figure out an alternate way of achieving it by creating the sequenced sketches common to filmmaking. Later they may want to incorporate or adapt these storyboards into the mini-comic activity on page 3 of this guide. **4**

## ANALYZING PLOT AND CHARACTER

After students have read all of *Calamity Jack*, reproduce and distribute the activity sheet on page 3 of this guide. You can use it as a formal assessment or to support recall prior to discussion, even allowing students to work on it as an open-book exercise. You can also use it to springboard instruction related to plot and point of view by having students share their work with the group. **6.3 / 6.4 / 6.8**

### STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

The instructional content of this teaching guide is aligned with ...

The Joint Standards of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA)

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) Benchmarks for Grades 6–8, Standards 5 and 6

## GUIDING DISCUSSION

The following questions are ordered in terms of increasing complexity, so that you can plan a discussion based upon the strengths of your middle school or upper elementary students and the time available to you.

**IDENTIFYING/SUMMARIZE** Aid students in summarizing the plot of *Calamity Jack* by providing the titles of each of the sections (pages 4, 40, 76, and 109). Have them identify the dramatic problem or obstacle for the protagonists in each of these four parts. **3 / 6.3**

**IDENTIFY/PARAPHRASE** Review and clarify story events following Freddie's Sparksmith's appearance by having students paraphrase his high-level vocabulary as found on pages 77, 79, 80, and 94. You can use Jack's narration at the bottom of page 79 as a humorous model for how to paraphrase. **4 / 5.3**

**UNDERSTANDING/MAKE PREDICTIONS** As students read, encourage them to make predictions about what will happen next at critical moments in the text. Then make sure that they remember to determine whether their predictions are confirmed as they continue to read. Pages 15, 37, 70, and 96 are all good choices in this respect. **3 / 6.1**

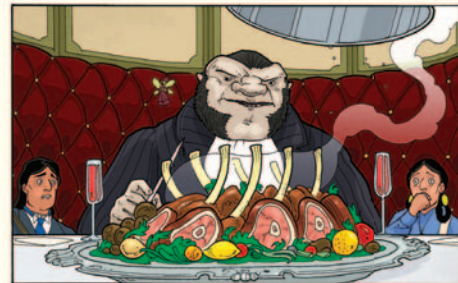
**UNDERSTANDING/CATEGORIZE GENRE** *Calamity Jack* blends aspects from well-known fairy tales with ingredients from the action/adventure, mystery/thriller, and historical fiction genres. Choose at least two of these four categories and have students identify the story elements that belong under them. Follow up by asking why creators might want to mix genres in this manner and how *Calamity Jack* manages to make the transition between genres relatively seamless. **6 / 6.2**

**UNDERSTANDING/COMPARE AND CONTRAST** Ask students to compare and contrast characters and settings based upon size, inviting them to speculate on the meaning behind such juxtapositions in the story. Students can contrast Pru with Blunderboar, normal-sized people with the Ant People, and the former's scale relative to both small structures and large ones (page 68 vs. page 79). Guide students to understand how *Calamity Jack* visually references the social metaphor present in phrases such as "the little people" and "big shots," and why this figurative use of size fits the book's theme of social justice. You can then build on the notion of size by helping students connect the text to other works of literature such as *Alice*



in *Wonderland* or *Gulliver's Travels*, both of which feature protagonists who are alternately huge and tiny. (The Lewis Carroll connection may be particularly apt given the book's inclusion of a jabberwock and a bandersnatch.) **3 / 6.9**

**ANALYZING/INTERPRET THEME AND SYMBOL** Have students interpret the themes of consumption and upward mobility that run throughout the text, making sure that they cite



specific examples. These might include the extended figurative treatment of the themes in Blunderboar's bone-based flour and Jack's repeated attempts to infiltrate the lofty apex of his tower. Be sure to have students include in their analysis Nathan Hale's artwork, which contains visual symbols that support and amplify these themes. **6 / 6.6 / 6.9**

**ANALYZING/ANALYZE SETTING AND CHARACTER** On more than one occasion, Jack comments on how hard life can be in the city of Shyport and how the urban setting complicates moral issues: "Out West things were simpler—there's good and there's bad" (page 89). Help students analyze this sentiment, finding text evidence that either supports or refutes it. Consider using the hierarchy of villains presented on pages 87–90 to illustrate the idea of a continuum of "bad guys"—a continuum on which Jack consistently places himself. But was Jack ever really a bad guy in this sense? And does the text ever justify thievery or other crimes? Why or why not? **6.4**

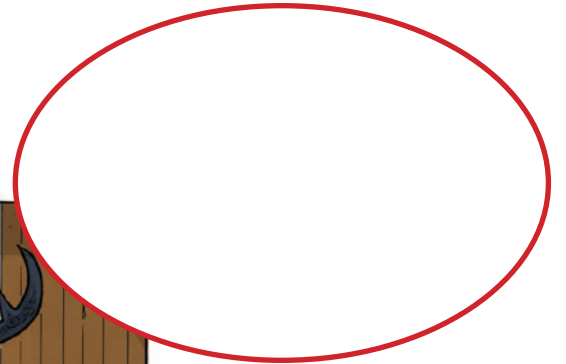
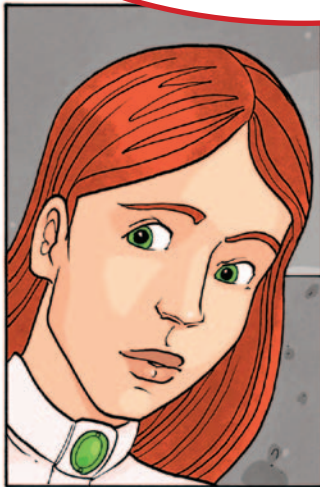
**ANALYZING/REFLECT ON THE TEXT** Trace the reasons for Jack's self-doubt, particularly before the plot's climax. Does it represent a rational response to circumstances, or is he simply more anxious because the stakes are so much higher? Focus on the narration and dialogue found on page 86 and pages 113 and 114. Then encourage students to share examples, either verbally with the group or by writing a personal anecdote, of times they have experienced self-doubt when faced with a task. Point out that we "hear" the little voice in Jack's mind via the narrative captions, but what does the little voice in their heads sound like? How does it perceive things as worse than they really are? **3 / 5.6 / 6.4 / 6.10**

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

Since you've completed reading *Calamity Jack*, you're aware of all the wild twists and turns that the plot takes. Yet, because the story is told from Jack's point of view, readers are often unaware of what other characters are really thinking—that's what makes certain developments so surprising.

Well, now's your chance to change that, even if just by a little bit. For the following key moments in the plot, consider what the character might really be thinking, given what you learn later. Then write these thoughts in the bubbles provided. Make sure your text matches not only the story situations but also the characters' personalities and voices.



## DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION

**BELOW-LEVEL LEARNERS** Support students navigating the mystery genre elements of the plot structure by revisiting passages in which information and reasoning is explicitly provided (pages 73, 76, and 77), clarifying issues as needed—such as Sparksmith’s misunderstanding of the attacks as genuine yet suspiciously located. Help students hunt for clues such as the presence of the Ant People on pages 27–29, and to understand the ironic use of words such as “conveniently” (page 69).

**ADVANCED LEARNERS** Invite students to research and report on the “steampunk” subgenre of fantasy and science fiction, and then to identify some of its common motifs and ideas in *Calamity Jack*.



**ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LEARNERS** Use the visuals to support oral language and vocabulary development. One way to do this is to have students ad-lib narration or dialogue for sequences that are largely textless (pages 43–48). They can do this either in English or first in their native language and then translate the words into English per NCTE/IRA guidelines.



## EXTENDING LEARNING

**PRACTICING VISUAL LITERACY** Identify and analyze the various types of “shots” and compositions that are used effectively over the course of the graphic novel. These include close-ups (pages 75 and 108), establishing shots (page 109), and overhead/bird’s-eye shots (page 90). Ask students to explain how in each case the choice of angle or proximity provides information, heightens drama, moves the plot, or expresses theme. **6**

**CREATING A TIMELINE** Invite students to read, or re-read, *Rapunzel’s Revenge*, pointing out how its events intersect with those in *Calamity Jack*. With this in mind,



have students create a single timeline that plots key incidents in both graphic novels prior to pages 38 and 39 in *Calamity Jack*. Instruct students to use text clues, such as information about the characters’ ages, to determine which events were happening roughly simultaneously for both main characters. **12 / 6.3**

**CREATING A MINI-COMIC** Encourage students to take notes on the storytelling and graphic techniques employed in *Calamity Jack* and use them to craft their own mini-comic. Comic Life and Comic Creator (at IRA/NCTE’s ReadWriteThink.org) can supply the tools you need to help them plan, script, draw, and letter their own tales. For a topic, provide the option of creating an original work of short fiction, a further adventure of Jack and Rapunzel—or an inventive retelling of another fairy tale. **12**

